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Author: **Ameko Kaeruda**
Illustrator: **Kazutomo Miya**

SEXILED

My Sexist Party Leader Kicked Me Out,
So I Teamed Up With a **Mythical Sorceress!**

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Tanya Artemiciov

A talented adventurer who graduated top of her class at the Imperial Magic Academy. After her party leader fires her due to her gender, she forms a new party with Laplace.

Laplace

The Great Sorceress, also known as the "Wicked Dragonwhore," who was sealed in the wasteland for 300 years. She takes a liking to Tanya and decides to join her on her quest for revenge.

The Tournament Begins—

Arianora Aweigkortt

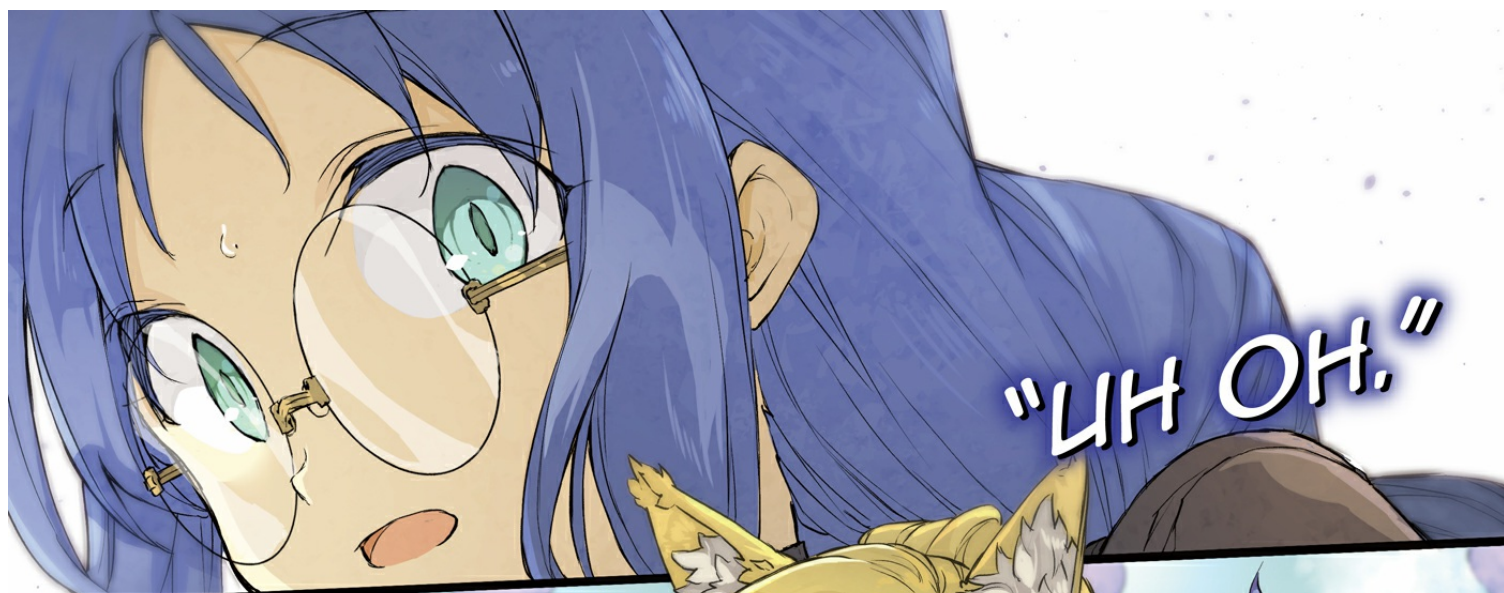
The Crown Princess of Pajan. Though she's only thirteen, she keeps a level head in any crisis.

Nadine Amaryllis

A Level 3 Healer who worked as a Guild receptionist until Tanya invited her to join the party.

"I'M
GONNA
CRUSH
YOU,
THAT'S
A
PROMISE."





"UH OH."



"FORTUNATELY
FOR ME, I'M
PRETTY GOOD
AT MY JOB,
TOO!"

Katherine Foxxi

A Mage who joined the party that fired Tanya. Her main motivation as an adventurer is to find herself a man, but her talent with magic is the real deal.

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Prologue: Sexiled

It was just another ordinary morning in Ode, the imperial capital of Pajan, a peninsular country in the Far East. There, in the center of the city, one particular inn—one with the Adventurers' Guild's seal of approval, no less—was bustling with activity.

The strong, the weak, the renowned, the obscure, and all those in between had gathered with their fellow party members for a quick meeting over breakfast. Some were perusing the latest quest listings, while others were taking stock of their inventories, reciting their party vows, squabbling with their comrades, and so on.

Truly, it was a peaceful morning no different from the last... except for one small detail.

Tanya Artemiciov, a Mage affiliated with a well-known mid-tier party, had just received the worst news of her life.

"I'm sorry, Tanya, but you're off the team."

"Wh... *Excuse me?!'*" Tanya shrieked.

Off the team? As in kicked out? Fired? Is this a joke? It was just so sudden—so harsh—she couldn't begin to process it.

The man who delivered the news was one Ryan Daars, leader of their party and a longtime friend of Tanya's. Five years ago they had both started adventuring, and founded this party together. They were 25 now.

"Let's take a step back here! You're *kicking me out?!'* Are you going to explain yourself, or am I just supposed to shrug and accept it?!"

"Mmm... Look, I get that this is hard for you, but try putting yourself in *my* shoes, yeah? This was a really hard decision, but at the end of the day, babe, I gotta do what's best for the party."

"*I beg your pardon?* I'm not your 'babe'—and don't touch my ass! My point is,

you can't just fire me for no good reason! Explain yourself!"

Tanya fixed Ryan with a sharp glare. Granted, she'd never had much respect for him, but this sudden, inexplicable dismissal was patently ridiculous, even for him.

But Ryan merely grinned back, smugly self-assured in the face of her anger. It was the same contemptible grin he always wore when he was trying to weasel out of trouble.

"C'mon, think about it. You're a woman, Tanya."

Okay, and? What of it? Are we seriously going there right now?

"...So what?" Tanya asked. She could feel her hands starting to shake. What did gender have to do with anything?

Of course, working as an adventurer generally involved some level of danger. The quest listings varied widely, from defeating legendary monsters to exploring ancient dungeons to search and rescue missions to item deliveries. Some chose to make a living running their own businesses, but that naturally came with its own risks. Hence, the vast majority chose to supplement their quest earnings by enlisting in the imperial army draft and thus securing a guaranteed minimum income from the government.

To be an adventurer meant polishing one's skills and knowingly casting away a life of stability and regular meals in the hopes of striking it big; surely that ambition was unisex.

"I'm just saying, we're not exactly getting any younger, you and me. But in your case, I'm sure you're thinking about... you know, marriage and kids and all that! Am I right?" Ryan asked, his expression dead serious.

Meanwhile, their fellow party members had gone completely silent.

"So yeah, maybe you should take this opportunity to change classes into something more beneficial for settling down. You could work as a Healer at a hospital—maybe in the maternity ward? I mean, since you'll be headed there anyways. Haha!"

Keep talking and I'm gonna punch your fucking teeth in, Tanya thought to

herself. Ryan would frequently go on rants about how “women are better off as Healers,” but not for a moment did she imagine he would actually kick her out over it.

“Being an adventurer takes a lot of stamina, you know? Us men are just naturally better equipped for the job. And you Mages are always casting those dangerous high-level attack spells. It’s just not safe!”

“What are you talking about? My so-called *dangerous spells* totally saved our asses on that last quest, I’ll have you know!”

“Eh, that was just a fluke.”

“What?”

It felt like the floor had given out beneath her feet. *A fluke? Everything I’ve accomplished for the party—you’re saying I was just lucky this whole time?*

How could that be possible, considering the sheer effort it took simply to make it to Mage status? This advanced-level class could only be attained by attending one of just three magic academies in the entire country. Then, upon graduation, students were required to transfer to a vocational training school for adventurers and graduate from *there*, too.

In Tanya’s case, the village elders had all tried to tell her that “women have no business trying to be adventurers,” but she fought them all until they finally let her enroll. From there, she spent every single night studying and practicing her spells like her life depended on it. All their lives, she’d never let Ryan surpass her in anything, be it classwork or practical exams, and she’d graduated top of their class.

But now all that effort had flown out the window. All because she dared to be female.

“Come on! I can’t just accept this!” she shouted, pleading.

Then she glanced around... and instantly, a chill shot down her spine.

The dining hall was filled with adventurers—elves, dwarves, humans, beastkin. All men.

She was outnumbered on all sides.

“Hello?! Anyone?!”

Even when she was in school, the student population was still 80% male. Only the Healers’ training program was female-dominated—the men referred to them as “party favors,” because once they graduated into full-fledged adventurers, the vast majority of them promptly paired off with male Warriors or Mages and left the party.

“I’m telling you, Tanya, this is for your own good,” Ryan insisted.

The Adventurers’ Guild Regulations, Article 134: *Recruitment and dismissal of party members shall be handled by the party leader or a majority vote.* And Ryan was the party leader.

“We’re all on the same page here, right, guys?”

The other party members all nodded. Unanimous. The proposal was approved.

Why? Why this? Why now?

“Soooo yeah, there you have it,” Ryan continued slowly—leisurely. “As of today, you are dismissed from this party.”

“This... can’t be happening...!”

And so Tanya Artemiciov balled her hands into fists and silently vowed to herself: *I’m gonna fucking kill you.*

Chapter 1: A Fateful Encounter With A Mythical Sorceress

1

The Western Wasteland was a giant death trap that most sane humans tended to avoid. Riddled with cursed swampland, the area was nigh uninhabitable to most plant life. And while it was just a stone's throw from the capital, there wasn't a single living being in sight... except for Tanya, of course. She'd come here to vent.

"From twilight I summon the ultimate *fucking* destruction! Ashes to ashes, dust to dust; heed my call and unleash your *fucking* might! *Fuck this shit!*"

Her furious incantation echoed across the entire wasteland, sending a tremor through the silty soil. If any other Mage had been around to hear it, they probably would've rolled their eyes at her complete disregard for proper casting etiquette.

Worse still, she was casting Explosion, an Arcane-level spell. Generally speaking, it wasn't the sort of spell you could conjure up without assistance from a magic circle or a staff. And with that half-assed incantation, the average Mage would have no hope of success.

But Tanya was not your average Mage.

And so, with an earth-shaking *kaboom*, an entire craggy mountain promptly shattered into shrapnel, the blast ruffling her cloak and pastel pink hair.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!* 'You're a woman, Tanya!' *Fuck you!* From twilight I summon the ultimate destruction! ASHES TO ASHES! DUST TO DUST!"

She fired off Explosion after Explosion, leaving giant craters in the earth as she decimated everything in sight. At the moment, she was hardly fit to be called a Mage—not when she was conducting herself like a total Demon Lord.

While she typically exercised some level of restraint in order to prevent

excess damage to the world around her, Tanya was in fact an exceptionally competent Mage. Not only could she perform Explosion with an imprecise incantation, but multiple times in a row at that. Her mana capacity was off the charts.

Sure, perhaps some of it could be attributed to natural-born talent, but for the most part, Tanya had dedicated a great portion of her life to magical studies and training. And as an adventurer, all that hard work was finally starting to bear fruit—that is, until—

“HEED MY CALL! AND UNLEASH YOUR MIGHT!” she screamed, letting loose again and again and again as her fury surged. At this rate, maybe she’d run out of mana and pass out... but right now, she didn’t care. All this raw magical skill, and yet she was thrown out of the party over her *gender*... She needed an outlet for her anger towards Ryan.

I mean, the whole reason I started holding myself back was because HE kept complaining that a girl shouldn’t use so many Arcane spells! Tanya fumed internally. *What a fucking joke! And after all I did for you! I even consoled you when you were crying about your receding hairline, you pansy asshole!*

“UNLEASH YOUR MIGHT! **EXPLOSION!** GO TO HELL!!!”

But just as the largest mountain on the horizon turned to dust—

“That’s quite enough, thank you!” a woman’s voice called out.

Instantly, Tanya’s rage-induced magic spell petered out. She could scarcely believe it. In what world could someone nullify a spell that was *already cast*?! She’d never heard of such a thing!

“Huh? Who’s there?!” she asked, baffled. This was the Western Wasteland. No one ever came here on a lark.

Then she realized—the voice was coming from *directly above her*.

“What the—you can FLY?!”

“Of course I can. I’m a Sorceress, you know.”

A lone woman floated in the air, bobbing slightly up and down like a buoy on the ocean’s surface, tendrils of long raven-black hair fanned out in every

direction as though she were underwater. Tanya stared, mouth agape. Even among the most competent Mages, only a scant few could cast levitation magic—and yet this woman wasn't even using a staff. To Tanya, this was beyond all reason.

“What do you want? Wait—did you just call yourself a *Sorceress*?”

Ancestor to the modern Mage class, the Sorceress class had long since been lost to the mists of time. It was a term reserved for those who could cast magic with a mere snap of their fingers, no study or training required. And once upon a time, the Empire of Pajan was home to a single Sorceress-class woman.

According to legends, her lifespan was so long, people questioned whether she was an elf or if she'd somehow attained immortality... but then Maxwell the Grand Mage sealed her away for all eternity and was lauded as a national hero, or so Tanya had heard.



“Yes, I’m afraid there’s no two ways about it. I’m a Sorceress, through and through,” the woman answered cheerfully as she bobbed in place. “My name is Laplace. *Enchantée, mademoiselle.*”

Laplace... Why does that name sound so familiar...?

2

“So what you’re saying is... my Explosion spell accidentally destroyed the mountain you were sealed under?”

“Oui, oui.”

“And you’re Laplace, as in, the Great Sorceress Laplace who was sealed away 300 years ago?”

“That’s me! Sorry to nullify your spell, but it was a bit much for a wake-up call. Surely you understand.”

“No, I *don’t*, actually! How am I supposed to believe this?!”

Believe this! Believe this! Believe this! Tanya’s voice echoed across the wasteland.

“Any Mage worth their salt knows the legend of Laplace, okay? She was a *phenomenal* Sorceress. There’s no way she was sealed right next to the frickin’ capital! I mean, we’re talking about *the* Laplace, AKA the Wicked Dragonwhore! She was caught plotting against the Empire! That’s the whole reason Maxwell the Grand Mage had to seal her away 300 years ago!”

The woman—Laplace(?)—laughed merrily. “My! Is that what they teach you in school these days? That’s hilarious.” After a quick mid-air somersault, she grinned. “Well then, if you need proof so badly, why don’t we play a little game?”

“What?”

“I mean, seeing as you’ve been setting off Arcane spells all over the place, I have to assume you’re pretty skilled.”

“Well...” Honestly speaking, yes, Tanya considered herself skilled. And here in

the Western Wasteland, where she had no reason to hold herself back, she was confident she could beat just about anybody...

But did that “anybody” really include THE Great Sorceress herself?

“Oh, don’t worry. I won’t attack you back.”

“...What?”

“Are you listening? I said I won’t attack you. All you have to do is land at least one hit, and I’ll let you win.”

This struck a nerve with Tanya. *You’re not going to fight back? What, you think I won’t even land a single hit? Does this look like my first rodeo to you?*

Sure, maybe Laplace(?) could use levitation magic, but Tanya was a seasoned adventurer in her own right. And she *refused* to let this human-shaped balloon with her devil-may-care attitude get the best of her! *Come down here and fight me like a woman!*

“If you win, I’ll do whatever you say. And if I win... hmmm... I want you to form a party with me.”

“What?”

“You’re an adventurer, are you not? I’ve always wanted to try it out, you know, at least once!” Laplace explained, spinning in giddy circles in mid-air.

You’re telling me THIS is the Great Sorceress? I don’t buy it. At all.

“Fine, whatever.”

Not like I’ve got anything to lose. And besides...

Tanya readied her staff.

...All I have to do is hit her, which means I should prioritize speed over power. And if there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s fast casting.

Her former party members used to order her around all the time:

“You don’t have to finish it off. Just buy me some time so I can land the final blow!”

“What? But wouldn’t it be faster and more efficient for me to defeat it?”

“C’mon, be a team player and back me up!”

*“...**Fireball!**”*

“Hell yeah! Time for me to end this!”

She would have these conversations all the time, especially with lower-level Brawlers and Knights who would later turn around and brag about the defeated monster like it was *their* accomplishment. It was *baffling*.

But now all that time spent micromanaging herself was about to pay off. Tanya could control her speed and damage output on a whim. Not even a mythical Sorceress could safely dodge every—

“Why does she keep dodging everything?!”

I don’t get it! No one’s ever been able to evade my Fireballs before!

And yet Laplace made it all look so trivial, twirling through the air. She didn’t even break a sweat. And most infuriating of all—

“Hahahaha! You’re pretty good, girlie!”

—she was clearly *having fun*.

“I have to say, I’m actually impressed... Perhaps this new generation of Mages isn’t so hopeless after all!” Laplace mused brightly.

Meanwhile, Tanya pressed a finger to her lower lip. *Why can’t I hit her? There has to be a reason! Think!*

“Wait... Are you using a force field?”

“Oho, well spotted! I honestly didn’t think you’d notice!”

“Wait... seriously?!”

A force field was a type of invisible magical barrier imbued directly into the earth’s strata, typically to protect castles, churches, or other important buildings. And since they were designed to draw power directly from subterranean mana veins, they were massive and immobile. Tanya had never heard of any force field small enough for just one person, much less one that could be moved around at will. The technology simply didn’t exist!

This woman operated on a level far beyond what the average person could

comprehend. Was it possible? Was she really Laplace the Great Sorceress?

Tanya lowered her hands and let her Fireballs fade.

“What’s this? Giving up already? In that case—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Nobody said I was giving up.”

Sorceress or not, I refuse to let you beat me.

Tanya smirked.

“Now that I know I’m dealing with a force field, the solution is simple. And you’re going to regret you ever dared to challenge me.”

“...Huh?”

With a deep breath, Tanya summoned up all of her remaining mana.

“From twilight I summon the ultimate destruction...”

“Wha—?!” Laplace froze in place. Naturally, she recognized the incantation.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

“Uh—wh—Explosion?! You’re casting an Arcane-level spell?! On ME?! You can’t be serious! Surely you understand it’s not safe! Why else would you come here to cast them?! You wanted a place with no innocent bystanders nearby! Well, here I am, bystanding! Don’t you think perhaps this is a little immature of you?! Hello?! Are you hearing me right now?!”

In contrast to her half-assed, curse-laden incantations from earlier, this time Tanya made sure every word was perfectly precise—all the better to enhance the spell’s power.

Her logic was simple: if the force field was the problem, then she just needed to break through it.

“Eeek...!”

From the moment they first met, Laplace had conducted herself with flawless poise, but now her smile had stiffened. She knew now that Tanya wasn’t joking around—no, she was genuinely prepared to launch a large-scale, military-grade, Arcane-level spell at a single person.

“W-Well, you know what they say—discretion is the better part of valor!”

And so Laplace promptly turned on her heel. No surprise there; not a soul alive would want to be caught in that blast. There was one small problem, however—this was the Western Wasteland, presently littered with giant craters following Tanya’s *stress relief activities* earlier on. Anything that could have been used as cover had long since been decimated.

“Oh crap!”

Try as she might to run, Laplace had nowhere to hide.

“Heed my call and unleash your might!”

“Gah! Nooooo!”

“Let’s see how you handle this, Sorceress! **Explosion!**”

There was a moment of silence. A flash of light. A deafening rumble. A whirlwind. And when the dust settled... Laplace was no longer airborne. Instead, she lay sprawled flat on the ground.

“Hrrkkk... I can’t believe it... You actually got me...?” she whimpered as her body twitched.

“Ha... hahaha... HAHAHAHA! They all underestimated me... Well, *look at me now*, assholes!” Tanya roared, victorious, her pink locks fluttering with the blast wave. “Admit it—I win!”

3

“So, uh, Laplace(?)...”

“Are you seriously still questioning—*ouch!*”

“Sorry! Anyway, I do want to apologize for casting a full-power Explosion on you. That wasn’t cool of me.”

“Oh, it most certainly wasn’t! That spell’s used to wipe out entire cities, you know!”

“Considering I passed out from mana deficiency right afterwards, I’d say we’re even... but I did technically win, though, right?”

“You won without a shadow of a doubt. And a Sorceress never goes back on her word.”

Laplace sighed dramatically. Sure, she was fresh out of a 300-year magic seal, but even then, she never expected that this girl would get the best of her.

Truly there was no fate more lonely than hers had been. Trapped in that giant stone prison, all of her mana had been sapped away. Time itself had stopped. Passing adventurers, tribes exiled from their homes, sometimes even little birds came and went, but none ever stayed.

As time went on, those passersby grew steadily more and more sparse, and the fearsome sorcery of the prosperous Pajan Empire began to decline... until only the most basic, watered-down “magic” remained.

But Tanya? Somehow she possessed what the rest of her generation lacked: power, precision, and most of all, the reckless courage necessary to turn an Arcane spell on another person without even flinching. She was crazy enough to go out into the middle of nowhere and start firing off Explosions at nothing—and it was that particular brand of crazy that had set Laplace free.

She was grateful to the little Mage, obviously, but more than that, she had taken a liking to her.

“Okay, well, before I state my demands... I’d like to see proof that you really are Laplace the Great Sorceress.”

“Oh, right. Proof, hmm? I suppose that’s only fair... After all, I imagine the average person would find it hard to believe that some random drop-dead knockout was in fact the very Sorceress that was sealed away for the past 300 years...”

“...Did you just call yourself a *drop-dead knockout*?”

“Well, it’s the truth, isn’t it?” Laplace remarked, idly floating into the air.

“Gah! You’re flying again!” Tanya tensed up. Truth be told, the mere fact that this woman could levitate was proof enough of her exceptional magical prowess—a level of skill befitting the title of Sorceress.

“The look on your face says you don’t believe me... Well, alright. How about

this?”

Laplace snapped her fingers. All at once, a blanket of dark clouds spread across the formerly clear blue sky, and a sheet of heavy rain poured down upon them. In seconds, Tanya’s clothes were soaked through. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Tanya was speechless.

“Whoops! Didn’t mean to get you wet!”

With another snap, the rain promptly let up. In its place a fierce wind blew, drying the meager fabric of Tanya’s outfit.

“Gah!” The gale sent her pale pink strands flying in every direction.

“Okay, back we go...” And with a final snap, the sunny skies returned at last.

“...*What just happened?!*” Tanya shrieked as her mind reeled.

“Huh? Oh, I was just messing around with the weather, that’s all.”

“Wh... *Messing around?!* With the *weather?!* You can’t do that! That’s, like, *extremely* forbidden sorcery!”

“Yes, well, I’m a *Sorceress*, remember? Comes with the territory, does it not?” Laplace did another somersault.

With this, Tanya was convinced. Levitation magic, a personal portable force field, and now weather manipulation? She had to be the real deal. Surely only the mythical Sorceress herself was capable of these things.

That just left one question...

“Were you going easy on me?”

“Hmm?”

“You know, during the ‘game’ or whatever. I mean, yeah, I hit you with an Explosion, but still! There’s no way I *actually* defeated the Great Sorceress, right? So you must’ve let me win on purpose!”

“What? No, I didn’t *let* you. That was all you, 120%,” Laplace replied in mid-air. “Granted, I couldn’t attack you back with the rule I put in place, but even then I wasn’t expecting much of you, to be quite frank. As far as I knew, you

modern Mages all paled in comparison to the spellcasters of my day. But you? Your technique is something to be reckoned with. Even if I hadn't underestimated you, I'm sure your Explosion would have defeated me regardless."

I mean, yeah... Explosion kiiiinda probably shouldn't be cast on other people in the first place...

"You're a formidable fighter," Laplace continued, gazing into Tanya's eyes as she bobbed up and down. "While you clearly have some level of innate talent, you also have knowledge and experience in spades. I can only imagine how much hard work you put in to get this far... I must say, I'm sincerely impressed. Not even my generation 300 years ago had many casters as incredible as you."

A moment later—

"Hnnnn..."

"...Huh?"

"Nnn... hhh... waaaahaaahhhh!"

All at once, Tanya began to sob like she was twenty years younger.

"Uh... wh... You alright there...?"

"Weeehhhhaaaaahhh... weh... gggpphhnnn!"

"Those are some *rather peculiar* crying sounds, you realize?!"

"I can't... guhhuuhhh... *I can't helb it!*" Tanya wailed.

Those words of praise had opened the floodgates. There was no holding back now. She had worked so hard—proved herself—she was the best in her field—and yet—

You're off the team. You're a woman, Tanya, Ryan's voice echoed in her mind. *You're a woman. You're a woman. You're a woman.*

She resented the fact that they had dismissed her based on something that was outside of her control. She was so, so *angry*.

"Um... I'b sowwy... I'ss nuffing... I jus' need to cry for a while an' den I'll ged ober it... Wehhh...!"

Tanya always hated the association between crying and femininity—that women were *expected* to be overly emotional—and so she had always kept her sadness safely behind closed doors.

But here she was. And the tears wouldn't stop.

"W-Well, um... There, there! I can tell something painful must've happened, or else you wouldn't have come out here to throw Explosions around, right? So go on and cry it out! We're both girls here, you know? And sometimes a girl's just gotta cry."

Tanya was too choked up to respond, but there was one thing she understood intrinsically: this floating Sorceress was trustworthy—at least 99%. How could she tell, you ask? Because Laplace was fighting her own trepidation in order to rub Tanya's back while she was crying.

And Tanya could feel a gentle warmth in those fingers.

4

"So yeah, I'm gonna get revenge!" Tanya declared (once she'd stopped crying).

"Revenge, you say?" asked Laplace.

"Yeah. I'm gonna make those assholes wish they were dead," Tanya growled, biting her lip and making it bleed. *Ah, the sweet, coppery taste of retribution.*

"Anyway, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Tanya Artemiciov—and I want *you*, oh mighty Sorceress, to help me get back at them!"

"It's lovely to meet you, Tanya. And seeing as you beat me fair and square, I'm happy to help you... but how?"

"I wanna beat them at their own game. See, the nationwide Adventurers' Sparring Tournament is coming up, so I want to enter the tourney and trounce my old party! Beat them into paste and make it look like an accident!"

"And where do I come in...?"

"I want you to form a party with me. That way we can enter as a team."

Instantly Laplace started to laugh, and it was no mystery why: “Form a party? Why, that’s precisely what I was going to ask of you if I’d won!”

“No, this is different. We’re not teaming up for fun. We’re doing it for revenge!” Just then, the earth began to rumble beneath her feet. “What the...? What’s going on?!”

“Oh boy, here he comes... That’s his roar,” Laplace sighed.

“*Roar?! Whose roar?!*”

“Well, you see, after I was sealed away, your beloved Maxwell let a certain something loose in these parts so people would stay away.”

“Wait... You don’t mean...”

“Oh, I’m afraid so,” Laplace replied, floating up into the air. “You’re an adventurer, are you not? Surely you’ve heard of the King of the Western Wasteland?”

On the horizon, that *certain something* flapped its wings, its roar sending a shockwave through the air.

“Anyway, as I was saying, it’s a Wyvern,” Laplace continued.

At this, Tanya looked past Laplace at the intruder... and promptly lost all hope. She was right, it was a Wyvern—an angry one, at that—flying at breakneck speed right towards them. *Gimme a frickin’ break!*

Wyverns were a rare and dangerous breed of dragon, but on the average day Tanya could take one down with little difficulty. One small problem, however: she had only just recently passed out from mana deficiency. There was no chance she could cast anything halfway decent in her current state. And as for the Great Sorceress?

“Hahaha! That Wyvern is simply *furious*! Maybe you hit it with one of your Explosions! Hahahaha!”

“Not funny, Laplace! What are we going to do?!”

“What do you mean? Just defeat it.”

“I can’t! Like, seriously, I really can’t! I don’t have any mana left! Why don’t

you defeat it, huh?! You're the Great Sorceress! I bet you could wipe the floor with that thing!"

"No, I'm afraid that would be impossible."

"What?"

"I think it might be an after-effect from the seal, but, um... I can't use any of my attack spells."

"WHAT?!"

All this time, you weren't simply choosing not to attack—you literally COULDN'T ATTACK?! When were you planning to drop THAT little bombshell on me?! Oh god, the Wyvern's almost on top of us... Damn it, Laplace! You really are nothing more than a stupid, human-shaped balloon!

"That look on your face says you think I'm nothing more than a human-shaped balloon."

"Damn right!"

"Wow... I wish you would've at least *tried* to deny it... Well, anyway. After watching you in action, I'm pretty sure *you're* the one who ought to 'wipe the floor with that thing,' as it were. And I know exactly what you need."

"Huh? Where are you going with this?"

"Have you given any thought to changing classes?"

"...What?"

Above them, the Wyvern let out an ear-splitting roar.

Do we really have time for this, Laplace? Because I feel like there are more pressing issues at hand here!

"Change classes to *what*?"

"In my esteemed opinion as a Sorceress, with your exceptional ability and track record as a Mage, I believe there's a class that would suit you even better."

"Okay, well, now's really not the time for..."

“You should be a Magi-Knight.”

“...Huh?”

“Are you listening? A Magi-Knight! Why limit yourself to mere spellcasting when you’ve got the confidence and tactical know-how to throw around Arcane-level spells without batting a lash? It’s a waste of your talents!” She extended a hand and cupped her pale fingers around Tanya’s cheek.

Tanya froze, rooted to the spot. “Wha... Huh...?” *Her... Her lips... She’s leaning in...!*

“Tanya Artemiciov! Right this moment, I command you to change classes to a Magi-Knight—the ultimate master-level class that can wield both physical and magical attacks! After all, if I’m a Sorceress, then we don’t *need* another pure caster! And besides... I think you’ll do well.”

“Uh, Laplace? Y-You’re in my bubble! Aah...!”

She thinks I’d be good as a Magi-Knight? The ultimate master-level class?!

Laplace’s lips pressed against hers, smothering her confusion—and a warm, fuzzy feeling washed over Tanya as Laplace’s mana transferred into her. Something inside Tanya felt restless, almost as though a tiny dragon had awoken deep within her. Her mind went blank—this was something she’d never felt before.

“Aah... mmph!”

Coming up for air, the Great Sorceress whispered, “I am the Great and Ancient Laplace. I may not be able to cast any offensive spells, but I can still make miracles happen.”

“Wh... Mmmm?!”

When they pulled apart at last, Tanya gasped for breath. For an ancient Sorceress, Laplace smelled *really* good... and her lips were pillowy soft.

“Now then... Despite your astounding raw power, somehow your mana circuits were all over the place, so I’ve taken the liberty of streamlining them for you! Now draw your sword, Magi-Knight!” Laplace placed one hand to the ground, and instantly the earth began to soundlessly split apart. “I summon

thee... awesome sword, or whatever!”

“Wow, your incantation *sucks*! One would think you’d be better at it, considering you can cast without a staff or magic circle!”

And yet the rift in the earth began to glow nonetheless. Lo and behold, there sprouted a massive sword, its length greater than Tanya’s own height.

“What *is* that?!”

“I’ve duplicated that one ‘Excalibur’ sword for you. Quite the classy gift, yes?”

“You *what*?!” *Are you nuts?! That’s a national treasure! And for that matter—*“This Excalibur knockoff is bigger than I am! How the heck am I supposed to wield it?!”

“Wait, what? The bigger the sword, the stronger the blow, right?”

“What are you, twelve?! That’s not how this works, you idiot!” *And you’re telling me SHE’S the Great Sorceress?!*

The Wyvern let out another roar and flapped its wings, drawing ever closer to its prey. Perhaps hunger had made it impatient.

“Uh-oh... It’s headed this way... Guess you’d better grab that sword and go defeat it!”

“You’re out of your mind if you think I can even lift this massive—”

Yoink.

For some reason, the Not-Excalibur was much lighter than Tanya had anticipated—to an *impossible* degree.

“What the...? It’s barely heavier than a staff!”

“During the kiss, I scanned your mana circuit patterns. Then, when I created the sword, I optimized it to match. That way you can always wield it! In a sense, it’s both a sword and a staff—the ultimate weapon! So, what do you think? Yet another genius creation from Laplace the Great and Beautiful Sorceress, wouldn’t you say?”

“Why would I say it when *you* already have...?”

The Not-Excalibur in her hand—mana flowing through her veins—feet firmly

planted on the ground—the Wyvern nearly upon them—

“Rrgh... There’s no time for wise-cracking! I’ll just have to wing it... Well, here goes nothing!”

Shaking the doubt and hesitation (and the memory of that sweet kiss) from her mind, Tanya took off running—

“Whoa, what the...?!”

Her whole body felt so *light*.

And in that instant, Tanya knew she could win.

When she focused her energy on her sword, she could practically *feel* her mana increase... and somehow she instinctively knew what to do next.

Wind Magic, engage!

With that thought, magic runes began to glow over the surface of the Not-Excalibur, and it promptly cast a spell to enhance Wit, the Wind Magic stat. No complicated incantation, no charge time.

“Holy crap! This sword is amazing!”

Mana flowed through her entire body. Wind Magic gathered at her feet. And then she ran, ran, ran at the speed of light, as though her body had become one with the wind itself. Already she was performing far beyond the level one would expect of someone who had only just become a Magi-Knight three minutes ago. Her heart hammered in her chest.



And as Laplace watched her go, she grew certain that she had made the right call.

“Yes, just like that... As a Mage, no matter her ability, her spellcasting was always going to be inefficient. Incantations waste time, and energy conversion wastes mana. But as a Magi-Knight, she can convert her vast supply of mana and precision spellwork into sword skills at no cost.” Laplace giggled and put a finger to her lips. “Oh, Tanya... how I love your spirit.”

Meanwhile, Tanya quickly closed the gap between herself and the Wyvern and leapt into the air. Laplace’s kiss had stimulated her internal mana supply and optimized it for her new class. Then, before Tanya’s brain could catch up, Laplace had forged her a sword from the raw materials lying around.

“You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were already at the max level for a Magi-Knight,” Laplace had giggled, without even stopping to address the fact that she had just forced a kiss on someone. Her personality was both exhausting and exasperating.

But as it turned out, this sword felt more at home in her hand than a staff ever did. The difference was so dramatic, she could scarcely believe it.

Tanya focused her strength and Wind Magic into her legs—and jumped.

“*Haaaah!*”

She rocketed straight into the air, over the rampaging Wyvern’s head, and let gravity pull her back down as she aimed squarely for the beast’s neck. A feat no ordinary human could hope to pull off.

Amused, Laplace did a somersault in mid-air as she watched the fireworks from afar. “Oho... She’s using Wind Magic to give her acrobatics a boost. Impressive.”

Tanya summoned up all the mana in her body. *Yeah, I’d say this is more than enough to slay a dragon.*

“RRRAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!”

As she prepared to use her favorite Arcane spell, Explosion, she could feel the mana flowing directly into her blade.

I can do this... I can use this mana-imbued sword to fell the Wyvern!

With her confidence restored, Tanya shouted: “Eat this! **Exploding Slash!**”

It felt like she was cutting through paper. There was a fountain of blood followed by a magical explosion as the mana in her blade detonated. The Wyvern plummeted to the ground without so much as a final roar.

As the dust settled, all that remained was a pink-haired Magi-Knight wielding her Not-Excalibur and an ancient Sorceress gleefully applauding.

“I did it... Hah... I really did it...!”

“Hahaha! Bravo! Fresh out of my prison and already I’ve made a wonderful discovery!”

“You and me both,” Tanya muttered.

Levitation magic, portable force fields, weather manipulation, and now she can rewrite people’s mana circuits? “Unconventional” doesn’t begin to cover it! God only knows what sort of revenge I could exact with her on my side...

Laplace was so far removed from common sense that it was actually kind of concerning.

“Oh man... What am I in for...?”

5

When the time came to return to Ode, only then did Tanya realize:

“We’re gonna stick out like a sore thumb if we go back!”

“Hmm? Why’s that?”

“I don’t know if you know this, Laplace, but *most people don’t float in mid-air!*”

The Sorceress tilted her head. “Maybe not most people, but I certainly can.”

Is she doing this on purpose, or is she just a total ditz? Tanya sighed. “Okay, well, the sword will draw its fair share of attention, too.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because female Knights are practically unheard of. Everyone’s gonna take notice.”

“What?”

“Plus, it’s so massive it looks like it was made for a giant. I guarantee you people are gonna stare at us. And not in a good way.”

Laplace tilted her head even farther. “Hmmm... I’m not sure I understand. Why have female Knights become so rare? They weren’t back in my day.”

“Huh? Well...” Tanya fell silent.

Come to think of it, she’d never stopped to consider why women generally never chose the Knight class. To her, it was just the way things were. Even the Mage class was 90% male. Not only were female adventurers the minority to begin with, but most of them were Healers.

“Good question, actually... Knights make a decent living, so I’m not sure...”

“Oh well. The answer isn’t that important, so never mind. Anyway, you don’t mind if I keep floating, right? *C’est bon?*”

“Where did you get that idea?! Look, just put on my spare pair of shoes. You can walk in heels, right?” Tanya yanked Laplace down out of the sky and handed them to her.

“Are you *serious*? I have to wear *these*? You’ve got to be kidding. Is this a prank? Or some form of torture?”

“Neither. I promise you, they’ll look great with that frilly black dress you’ve got on.”

“Oh, this is so embarrassing... Don’t watch me put these on, okay?”

As requested, Tanya turned away and waited, though frankly she didn’t see what was so shameful about putting shoes on. Then, once a reasonable amount of time had passed—

“Okay, Laplace, are you ready to—PFFFFT!”

As she turned back around, the sight that awaited her instantly made her start pointing and laughing.

“HAHAHA! Oh my god! What is the *matter* with you, Laplace?!”

“D-Don’t laugh at me! I can’t do it! My feet hurt! These shoes are *barbaric*!”

There stood Laplace the Great Sorceress, looking like a bow-legged fawn.

“Hee hee hee! That’s one hell of a look, Laplace! Do it again!”

“Rrrrgh... Mocking me already, I see. And it hasn’t even been a full day since I was unsealed... Personally, I’d rather be un-heeled! Posthaste!” Pouting her lips, Laplace floated up into the air once more.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry for laughing. Seriously though, have you never worn heels before?”

“These things didn’t exist back in my day. And for good reason! They’re impossible to walk in! Then again, I haven’t had much walking experience.”

“...What?”

“My father was the Court Grand Mage, and my mother was a former shrine maiden at the Temple of the Dragon God. I made a name for myself as a child prodigy fairly soon after I was born, and from there I had a very sheltered upbringing to the point that I never needed to walk on my own two feet. With my innate magical talent, I got everything I ever wanted. Then, once I learned levitation magic, I grew obsessed with it... All in all, it’s really not my fault that I never had the chance to walk.”

“You can humble-brag all you like, but I’m not impressed.”

“I’m not *bragging*! I’m gorgeous and I hail from an influential family—these things are simply facts!”

“You just can’t stop talking about how hot you are, can you?”

In the end, the two women agreed on a compromise: Laplace would wear the heels and *pretend* to walk while floating a few centimeters off the ground. This was the condition under which Tanya permitted her to appear in public.

I’ve really got my work cut out for me, don’t I?

Chapter 2: The Talk of the Town

1

Just outside the city gates, Laplace floated up and peered around at their surroundings. “This place has really gone to the dogs over the past three hundred years,” she frowned.

“Yeah... We’ve been in an economic crisis ever since we lost the war with the neighboring nation. Good thing we managed to keep them from invading, at least.”

“Fascinating... We were practically invincible back in my day.”

“Alright, well, it’s time for you to go back to fake walking, okay?”

Fortunately, the gatekeeper was so checked out, he failed to notice that the woman who had left town alone this morning had since mysteriously acquired a companion.

But no sooner had they passed through the gates than Tanya noticed something strange: the streets were in an uproar.

“Huh? What’s got everyone in a fuss?” she mused quizzically.

“Extra! Extra!”

Taking Laplace by the hand, Tanya led her into the crowd to acquire a newspaper.

“What’s got everyone so worked up? Is it some kind of crime or accident-
AAAAAAAH!!!”

“What is it? What’s the matter? Let the Great Sorceress have a look!”

“...I can’t believe it...”

“Hmmm?”

Laplace peered down at the paper in Tanya’s hands—and since she was both

taller *and* currently levitating, this meant leaning directly over Tanya's shoulder with their cheeks touching.

Tanya flinched slightly. *Why does she smell so good?*

"Oh, it seems our written language has evolved a fair bit over the past few centuries. Let's see here..."

BREAKING: Unusual Activity In Western Wasteland Viewed As Potential National Security Threat

As of this morning, the Wyvern of the Western Wasteland was found dead in its natural habitat. The culprit is currently unknown, but considering the beast's considerable size, it is believed to be the work of one or several magical platoons. The Imperial Magic Association has dispatched an emergency investigation team to determine the cause of death and track down those responsible for the slaughter.

"Wow! They found out pretty quickly!" Laplace chuckled to herself.

Meanwhile, Tanya began to panic. *No, no, no! NOT GOOD!*

"Laplace, this is a serious problem! Oh my god... Holy shit... If they find out, I'll be barred from the tournament!"

Worse still, the article kept throwing around the word "culprit" like it was a crime... Then she remembered: for certain species of dragons, Wyverns included, the party leader was required to submit an application prior to hunting it down. She'd been so busy, uh, *surviving*, that she'd completely forgotten. *Oops.*

All around them, they could hear the citizens gossiping:

"The Wyvern's dead?! Maybe it was some high-level adventurer?"

"Dude, even a magical platoon couldn't take that thing down."

"We can't say for sure! Lots of competent adventurers have been flocking into town ahead of the big tournament, you know!"

"I don't know... I wouldn't trust some outsider who can't even commit to a party. Something about it just screams 'criminal,' you feel me? Whoever it was, I hope they track 'em down."

Crumpling the newspaper into a ball, Tanya wiped away the river of sweat trickling down her forehead. *Oh my god, I CANNOT let them find out I did it! Ugh, I'm sweating like a pig. I must look like a frickin' water fountain!*

In contrast, Laplace was all smiles. "Hee hee! We'll be *fine*! They'll never find out! Now then, exactly how big is a platoon, anyway? Thirty people? Hahahaha! Imagine the looks on their faces if they learned the culprit was a lone woman! I bet they'd wet their pants in fear!"

"SHHHHH! Keep your voice down, dumbass!" Tanya hastily clapped a hand over the ditzy Sorceress's mouth.

"Mmmph!"

Fortunately, the crowd was too busy reading the newspaper to pay attention to them.

"Let's just go buy our equipment, okay?" It was only a matter of time before someone noticed Laplace was floating, and Tanya was eager to reduce that risk as much as possible. "We'll get you a nice, long dress, or maybe a robe—something that can hide your feet. Yeah, that'll work!"

"C'est bon, d'accord. No complaints here. This dress is about three hundred years out of fashion by now, anyway. Hee hee... Shopping, shopping! Yay!"

In her glee, Laplace was about to do a somersault in mid-air—until Tanya tackled her to the ground.

"STOP THAT!"

2

Out front, the sign read in giant letters: *ADVENTURERS' GUILD RETAILER.*

"...Is this really the best they've got?!" Laplace scoffed.

"Shhhh! I told you, keep your voice down!" Tanya hissed, but it was too late. The shopkeeper was glaring at them.

"I'm just saying, if this is the 'official Adventurers' Guild retailer,' surely they ought to have more of a selection than *this!*"

“There aren’t a ton of female adventurers, remember? We’re considered a niche market. It’s like this in every store.”

There were a handful of different national clothing retailers for adventurers: Door-mart, Bullseye, Costlow, plus some specialty stores for large-bodied races like Beastkin’s Wearhouse. But no matter where you went, most of the selection was inevitably geared towards men. If there was a ladies’ section, it was often a single tiny rack tucked away in a corner on the highest floor. Naturally, the selection was piss-poor, everything cost slightly more than the menswear, and none of it ever went on sale.

In the beginning, even Tanya had balked at it, but over time...

“I’ve just come to accept that that’s how things are.”

“What?! You can’t just accept this! You’re an adventurer, so you have a right to a decent selection! See that? The men’s section has a ‘buy one, get one half off’ deal going on! It’s not fair!”

“Ladies, please!” Having lost his patience, the bald, middle-aged shopkeeper stormed over to us. From his brawny build, it was clear he was a former adventurer himself. “I’m runnin’ a business here, alright? No more window shopping. Either buy somethin’ or don’t.”

“Oh, sorry! I’m looking for Knight gear, and she needs a Mage robe with a long skirt.”

“Hmm? You sayin’ you’re a Knight?”

“Uhhh... yeah...? Technically?” *As of this morning, anyway.*

Laplace smirked. “Heh heh! Just wait ‘til you hear this, mister. She’s not just any Knight—she’s a Magi-Knight!”

“Say wha?! A *Magi-Knight*?!”

The shopkeeper stared at me in shock for a moment—then burst out laughing.

“Pffffhahaha! Yeah, right! Nice try, lady. There’s no way this chick is a Magi-Knight. That’s a master-level class. Even for a guy, it’d take like twenty more years to get there.”

Tanya was hardly surprised, though. No one would believe that a woman had achieved a master-level class change. Hell, they'd had trouble believing she was a Mage.

Hoping to smooth things over, she laughed politely... but Laplace had other ideas.

"Oho, interesting. So Tanya here can accomplish in three minutes what the average guy can't manage for twenty years."

"You say somethin'?"

"Nope! Not a word!" Tanya shouted as she slammed Laplace into the wall with the force of a thousand suns. *Picking unnecessary fights with shopkeepers? Hard pass!*

Ominous, dark smoke rose from Laplace's scalp as she pulled herself out of the crater in the wall. "*Oui, c'est exact...* I didn't say... anything... patently untrue, that is..." With a half-hearted thumbs-up, she slumped her shoulders.

"See? We didn't say a word, did we, Laplace?! Anyway, shopkeep, we're gonna need to borrow your dressing room!"

Conflict avoided! Tanya heaved a sigh of relief.

Then again... I've spent my whole life trying not to make waves, and look where it's gotten me... Kicked out of the party because of my gender... Her heart twinged. Reflexively, she pressed a hand to her chest.

"Uhhh... Okay... You're pretty strong, eh, lady? Anyway, once you're done, I'm gonna need you to pay for that wall."

Ouch... Right in the wallet.

3

"Ow, ow, ow... Tanya, please don't forget, your mana's boosting your physical stats now," Laplace whimpered as she sat in a chair in the corner of the store.

After three hundred years, she was finally free. During that time, both the capital city of Ode and its people had changed dramatically.

While Tanya was getting dressed, Laplace looked around the store. Customers were sparse, but a fair few female adventurers had come and gone.

Then, after a while, it hit her:

“Wait... Aren’t they dressed a little too lightly?”

The Healers, the Mages, plus both of the Thieves she saw—they were all barely wearing any armor at all. In fact, some of them were essentially walking around in bikinis.

“Is this some kind of fashion trend? I don’t get it...”

Makes me wonder what Tanya’s putting on. As a Magi-Knight, she’ll need all kinds of armor—everything from shoulder pads to gauntlets. Surely SHE won’t walk out in a glorified bikini, right?

“Ta-daaa! Here I am!”

“Oh, welcome back, TanyaaaaAAAAAAAAAAHHH! What on earth is THAT?!”

“Huh?”

“Why are you in a STRIPPER OUTFIT?!?”

“What?! This isn’t a stripper outfit! It’s ladies’ armor!”

“In what world is *that* considered ARMOR?! You do realize Knights fight on the *front lines*, yes?! Why wouldn’t you want to cover your midriff?!”

Indeed—Tanya had popped out of the dressing room wearing bright pink bikini armor.

“And here I thought your Mage getup was a little exhibitionist... Tanya... Could it be that you’re a... what’s the word... a nymphomaniac?!”

“Wh... Rude much?! Look... do you think I WANT to wear this?! Because I don’t! But it’s what the Adventurers’ Association recommends!”

“*What?*”

“Here—see this official seal of approval? You have to wear equipment with this mark or else you can’t work for the Guild!”

Tanya’s face flushed brighter than her pink bikini. Beside her, the shopkeeper

grinned smugly. Meanwhile, Laplace's jaw dropped. *Unbelievable*. How could the Adventurers' Association possibly approve of such flagrantly unsafe armor?

"This style's been in fashion ever since we found out that women have to expose as much skin as possible in order to boost their mana sensitivity."

Aha. That explained why it seemed as though every female adventurer was so ridiculously scantily clad: *they were being lied to*. Truly lamentable.

Laplace sighed heavily. In her absence, society had gone backwards, and apparently now people were spreading misinformation about magical theory. As a result, the masses had grown ignorant.

"Haaah..."

"What's the matter, lady? Got a problem with my store?"

"*Non, non*. My problem is with societal power structures."

"Societal what now?"

"Your idea of what's normal. Your customs. No one realizes how utterly corrupted they've become."

"The hell are you talkin' about?"

"Fine. Listen up, you two. The great and beautiful Laplace will give you a lecture on just how stupidly pointless this stripper armor truly is."

With a snap of her fingers, a swirl of letters and diagrams appeared in mid-air.

"Wh-What the?! No incantation?!" the shopkeeper yelped.

His voice echoed through the otherwise empty store.

"...So, in conclusion, mana circuits form the foundation of all magic. The key is in knowing how to circulate and amplify your mana in order to produce the desired result. That's it. There is absolutely *no* correlation between mana sensitivity and bare skin. Zero. Zilch. Got it?"

So ended Sorcery 101 with Professor Laplace. Even Tanya, who had graduated at the top of her class at both the magic academy *and* adventuring school, had never even heard of some of the concepts Laplace presented. All in all, it was highly educational. This Great Sorceress really knew her stuff.

“Wait, so... you’re saying...” Tanya swallowed hard. “All the skimpy armor... and the sheer pantyhose...”

“Nothing more than sexy clothes.”

“Oh my god...” Tanya clutched at her hair. *All the times I swallowed my pride and put on those stupid, form-over-function, pointlessly see-through outfits... All the times I practically froze to death, or got weird tan lines... You’re telling me it was all just a big waste of time?! Pardon my language, but this is BULLSHIT!*

She could feel burning rage welling up inside her.

“A-Alright now, I understand where you’re comin’ from. But at the end of the day, this is all I got in stock! If you don’t like it, take your business elsewhere!”

“Now, now. No need to leap down my throat about it,” Laplace grinned. “Very well. Tanya can have the stripper armor. As for me, I’ll take... that white dress you’ve got there. It’s a decent length, and I quite like the needlework on the sleeves.”

“Excuse me? That dress is meant for master-level Healers!”

“Oh, don’t blow a gasket. Tell me, Tanya, what’s your favorite color?”

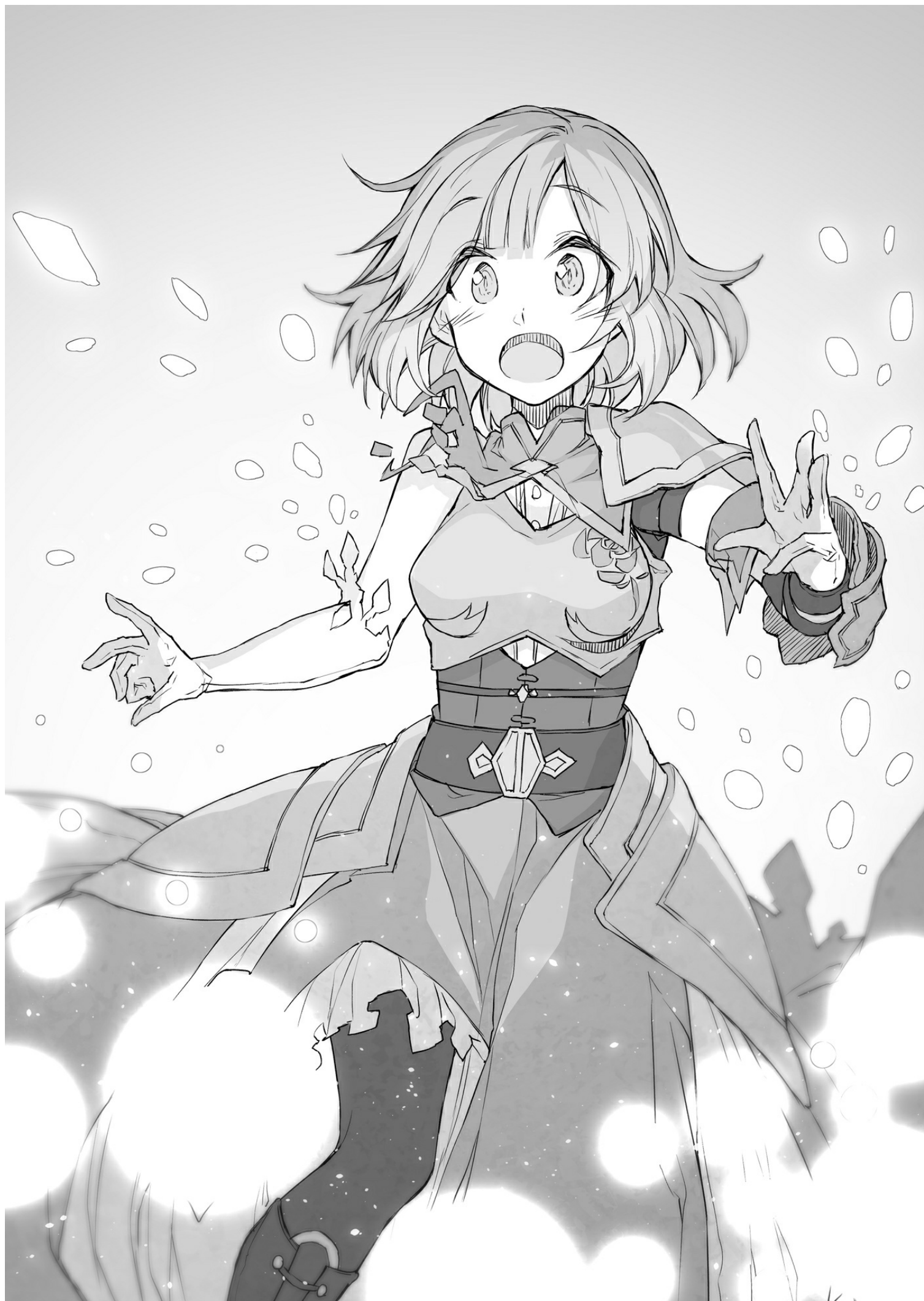
“Huh? Oh, umm... red, I guess?”

“Ooooh! Nice! Red, the color of blood... The color of revenge... Sounds perfect!” Laplace exclaimed in a singsong voice. “*Très bien!* Just leave it to me. I’ll remodel that teeny-weeny bikini into the ultimate armor—with a superb design and stat boosts to boot—or my name isn’t Laplace the Great Sorceress! Let’s do this!”

With a snap of her fingers, the pink bikini top transformed into a gallant breastplate, with only the Adventurers’ Association seal left intact. Fabric expanded before their eyes; Tanya’s heart fluttered with joy as a magnificent cloak gracefully descended down to her ankles.

As for the vestment Laplace had chosen for herself, the distinct needlework on the sleeves remained as the thigh-high slit magically sewed itself back up. Its white hue darkened to an inky black that matched her hair.

Tanya’s eyes sparkled. “Wow! Oh my god... this is so *cool!*”



“Heh heh! Piece of cake. Not only did I improve the design, but I maxed their physical and magical defense stats, too! So, what do you think? Do you like it?”

“I LOVE IT! Man... I’ve always dreamed of wearing something like this!”

“It pairs well with the sword, too. What about mine? Thoughts?”

“You look *amazing*! Not that I didn’t like your old dress, but wow, you look right at home in Healer robes! And having your legs covered adds a certain air of mystery... Wait a minute. Um, Laplace? You forgot to cover up your, uh... chest area.”

“Hmm? Why should I?”

“Well, weren’t you saying we don’t need to show skin?”

“Correct—we don’t *need* to. But in this case, I want to.”

“Why would you *want* to?”

“Because it’s fun!”

Meanwhile, after witnessing Laplace’s god-tier magical prowess, the shopkeeper was utterly decimated.

4

“Wait, seriously? You want us to *pay him* for those shitty outfits?”

“You swear an awful lot, don’t you, Tanya? Anyway, yes, of course we’re going to pay him. Otherwise we’d be stealing from him. Not to worry—I’m the one with the wealthy family, so I’ll cover it. My treat.”

Laplace opened her leather satchel and took out her money... her *three-hundred-year-old money*.

“The hell is this? We don’t accept these here.”

“*WHAT?!*”

“*FUCK!*”

Their screams echoed through the store...

“...So, cash or credit?”

Chapter 3: Living the High Life

1

The Little Vixen: one of Ode's more popular pubs. Owned and operated by a middle-aged foxkin woman, the menu was a bit on the pricey side, but the comfort food (and the booze) was simply to die for. It was by no means a classy establishment, but nonetheless, rumors of its exceptional quality lured in wealthy patrons with discerning palates, often aristocrats in disguise.

Tanya swallowed hard as she skimmed the menu. Under normal circumstances, she would hesitate to order from somewhere this expensive.

"Tanya?" the ancient Sorceress inquired.

"Laplace... I'm not sure I..."

"Now listen here, Tanya. We're *adventurers*. Surely we have the right to do this at least once in our lives, don't you think?"

Laplace stared directly into her eyes. She had a fork in her left hand, a knife in her right, and a napkin tucked at her collar.

"Ugh... Okay! I'll do it!"

"That's the spirit!"

Tanya turned around in her seat.

"Excuse me!"

Then, once she managed to flag down the owner, she took a deep breath and shouted:

"We'll take one of everything! Everything on the menu, please! And... and a bottle of your most expensive wine!"

"What?! Are you girls sure about that?!"

"Yes, quite sure. I'm very hungry, you see," Laplace chimed in. "Plus, this

money is burning a hole in our pockets.”

“Yeah! We’ve got money to spare! A lot of it!”

Indeed, it was a hefty sum that had emboldened them to go all out. It had all started just a few hours earlier...

2

At the Adventurers’ Guild Retailer, things were getting pretty heated over at the equipment counter. A vein bulged on the brawny shopkeeper’s bald forehead.

“Seein’ as you’ve already gone and modified my merchandise, I assume you’re planning to pay for it, right?”

Tanya and Laplace were in deep trouble. First they’d insulted his wares as useless (or “shitty,” in Tanya’s case). Then they’d performed magical alterations on them without permission. And now Laplace had no way of paying for it.

“I-If you would just accept these coins...”

“Fat chance, lady. I’ve never seen money like that in all my life.”

Gritting her teeth, Laplace clutched her satchel full of three-hundred-year-old currency.

“It’s alright, Laplace. I can pay for it.”

“Nngh... I’m sorry, Tanya...”

And so Tanya spent almost her entire life savings to cover both the equipment and the crater she (well, technically Laplace) had left in the wall.

“Laplace the sad little Sorceress...”

“C’mon, Laplace, cheer up.”

“How do you expect me to bounce back from that? I was trying to show off, and I failed spectacularly!”

“Maybe so, but hey, now we’ve got some pretty cool equipment!”

“Nnngh...”

As the two of them walked through town, Tanya glanced around nervously. Out loud she was trying to stay positive in the hopes that Laplace would feel better, but they were flat broke, and she didn't have a clue where they'd be sleeping tonight.

"Say, um, Tanya?"

"What is it?"

"I can't help but notice what little savings you had. Surely a Mage of your ability could've made more profit than *that*."

"Excuse me?! First you make me pay for everything, and now you wanna talk shit about me?! You wanna go, old-timer?!"

"No, no! Sorry, I misspoke. So, I take it you're the splurging type?"

"No!"

Tanya balked at this. She'd considered her savings to be pretty sizeable, you know, comparatively speaking... especially since her wages as an adventurer hadn't been anything to write home about. A majority of the money her party had earned from the Adventurers' Guild—both base pay and quest bonuses—went to the men.

As party leader, Ryan took home a solid 20% off the top. The remaining 80% was then distributed based on class.

At the bottom were the Healers, the majority female class, who took home approximately 7% on average. Next were the Archers, only slightly above Healers at 10%. Then there were the advanced classes, Knights and Mages, who received anywhere from 15-20% each... or at least they were supposed to, but...

"On average, I only got about 12%."

"Wait, what? Why's that?" Laplace asked.

"...Because he always paid women less."

"What? Why, that's positively fucked up, if you'll excuse my French!"

"Yeah, it is. But I never really stopped to think about it—I was too busy trying

to be perfect. That way no one would look down on me for being a woman, you know? But then he fired me, and I realized that all my hard work was for nothing.”

Tanya sighed. It sickened her to think she could’ve made more money if only she’d been born male. Her resentment towards Ryan bubbled to the surface once more—

Just then, her stomach let out a plaintive rumble, trumpeting her hunger for all the world to hear. Broke or not, her body still had needs.

“It seems you’re as hungry as I am...”

“Yeah...”

“I’m so sorry, Tanya... If only my money was still good... We could be living the high life right about now...”

“No more apologizing! We’ve been over this! It’s not your fault, Laplace!”

“Here. As an apology, you can have this.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a protective talisman. I make them for fun in my spare time! Don’t worry, it actually works. Plus, it’s got these cute little red jewels embedded in it, see?”

“Protective... talisman...?” Tanya stopped short. “And you... make these yourself?”

“Hmm? That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

A protective talisman. Made three hundred years ago. By Laplace the Great Sorceress. One by one, the pieces fell into place—

Holy crap, there’s hope for us yet!

“HELL YEAH!!! What’re we standing around here for?! Let’s get going!”

“Huh? Wh... What’s gotten into you, Tanya?”

“Gimme that talisman! Alright, here we go! Start running!”

And with that, she grabbed Laplace’s hand and took off like a bat out of hell.

“Whoa! W-Wait! Tanya! You’re going too fast!”

Laplace felt as light as a feather—as though Tanya were pulling a balloon by its string. Naturally, this was because the Sorceress was quietly levitating beneath her new robes.

It's time to make the biggest sale of our lives!

3

“Good morning!”

“Hello there! Welcome, welcome.”

Tanya had dashed full-speed into the nearest magical pawn shop. Adventurers of the Mage or Shaman class would frequent stores like these to buy and sell equipment or magical artifacts.

“What’s this now? You look to be of the Knight class, are you not?” asked the elderly gentleman seated at the counter, his eyes on the oversized sheath Tanya carried on her back.

“Oh... uh... well...”

“Tanya here is a Magi-Knight—a fusion of the Mage and Knight classes. Surely she’s allowed in here, is she not?”

“A Magi-Knight? Very funny,” the man scoffed.

Laplace started to argue, but Tanya raised a hand to stop her. Then she held up the talisman. “I’m here to sell an item.”

“Oho... Something rare and interesting, I hope... Hm?”

“This is a protective talisman said to have been personally handmade by Laplace, the Great Sorceress of times long past.”

“WHAT?!” Instantly the old man leaned forward to inspect the talisman. “A Talisman of Laplace... renowned for their tremendous efficacy and imbued mana... and only four have been confirmed to still exist intact! You realize we’re talking about a *national treasure*, correct?!”

“Correct.”

“This was made by THE Laplace?!”

“Yup!”

“Wow... I didn’t realize my handmade goods were so valuable!”

“*Your* goods?”

SLAM!

“Just ignore her, sir!”

“Nnnn... Don’t abuse me, Tanya...”

“A-Are you alright, miss? You’re... smoldering...”

“Heh heh... Oh, this is no big deal...”

The owner looked from Tanya to Laplace, squinting suspiciously. Then his gaze returned to the talisman.

“This specimen is in pristine condition. If it’s real, why, its value would be equal to a year’s salary for an entire party!”

“Oh, it’s definitely real. Feel free to appraise it.”

“Hah! I’ll have you know, we’re the largest pawn shop in the neighborhood. If it’s real, I’ll buy it off you for... how about five million?”

“For this? That’s *way* too cheap! Two hundred million!”

“Wh—?! That’s extortionate!”

“Hey man, if you don’t wanna buy it, I’ll go sell it to someone else.”

“Nngh...!”

Not only were these talismans made with extremely rare ancient precious metals, but their design featured extremely high-quality magical elements, and their scarcity made them popular as collector’s items. With these traits combined, a Talisman of Laplace was the *ultimate* prize in the world of rare items.

As the old man hemmed and hawed, a grin spread across Tanya’s face. *Time to lay on the pressure.*

“I mean, have you looked at this thing? I admit, it’s smaller than the others, but it’s in perfect condition! Two hundred million is a steal, to be honest!”

“You say that, but... the jewels it uses are fairly commonplace...”

“Okay, fine. I’ll settle for twenty million, just for you.”

“Wow, that’s a drop!”

“How about it?”

“...Ten million.”

“Eighteen million.”

“Grrrrgh... Fifteen million!”

“Sixteen million. And I won’t go a coin lower.”

Silence lingered between them... and then, finally, the old man caved.

“Fine, you win! We have a deal!”

“Ooh! A pleasure doing business with you!”

Yesssss! With this, we’ll never have to worry about money again. Instead, we can focus on my revenge!

“Slow down, little lady. First I need to appraise it. Hell if I’m gonna drop sixteen million on a knockoff.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Take your time! I’m not worried.” After all, Laplace was literally carrying it with her.

“Very well... You know, I must say, you’re a good saleswoman.”

“Heh heh! Who, me? Nawww.”

The appraisal took a full two hours. The result? Real, obviously.

Stacks on stacks of gold coins were steadily piled up before their eyes.

“Wow! So this is modern money! There’s so much of it... you’re incredible, Tanya!” Laplace wrapped Tanya in a victory hug.

“All thanks to you! Eeee!” Tanya squealed, hugging her back.

And after the ashen-faced pawnbroker coughed up that sixteen million secul, the two women skipped all the way to the tavern.

4

Which brings us back to the Little Vixen. Yes, Tanya Artemiciov was now filthy rich.

“Eh heh heh heh! Make it rain!”

They ate. They drank. Laplace’s hunger was bottomless; she consumed dish after dish. As for Tanya, she took small bites of food while chugging straight from the bottle of wine. Then, while Laplace was picking at her dessert of sorbet, she suddenly looked up.

“You know... if you want, I can always make more talismans. We could open our own store!”

“Huh? Oh... Nah, that’s a bad move. You gotta think about supply and demand, see. If people realize we’ve got a bunch, they’ll start haggling the price down. Rarity’s what gives these things value.”

“Oh, interesting... you’re pretty smart, huh, Tanya?”

“Heh heh! I grew up poor, so I had to learn all this stuff the hard way.”

“Did you, now? I grew up fairly wealthy, myself.”

“Yes, I know! Are you seriously trying to brag right now?!” Tanya retorted, then polished off her bottle of wine.

Her former party members always used to “confiscate” her wine whenever they’d decided she’d had too much, claiming they were “looking out” for her. But now she could buy and drink all the alcohol she wanted. And *damn*, did it taste good.

5

Next, the two women decided to settle down for the foreseeable future in a luxury hotel. Hooray for disposable income!

They curled up beneath thick, fluffy blankets, and when they next awoke, they enjoyed a free continental breakfast in the meal room. Unlike the dirt-cheap Guild lodgings, it was actually a clean and presentable establishment,

thank the heavens.

Once they'd dressed themselves in Laplace's cute, custom-made, stat-maxed equipment...

"Ooooh! So this is the Adventurers' Guild I've heard so much about! This little Sorceress is so excited!" Laplace squealed, eyes sparkling.

Hand in hand, they had arrived at the Ode branch of the Adventurers' Guild.

"Wait, what? Is this your first time visiting the Guild?" Tanya asked.

"In my day, adventurers were like nomads, traversing the continent to wherever their journey took them next. But while I was sealed in the Wasteland, I overheard a passerby saying one of the veteran adventurers had created a place where all of them could band together and go on quests as a group! We never had anything like that three hundred years ago, and the concept was so novel and exciting, why, I've always hoped I'd see it for myself someday!" Laplace gushed, gazing up at the sign hanging out front.

Tanya grinned halfheartedly. "Right... well, not to be a buzzkill, but it's not as amazing as you might think."

And so they stepped inside.

"First, we need to register our party. Good thing there's a half-off summer special going on right now."

"Interesting... So the mere act of *registering* costs money, does it? This 'Guild' must turn a tidy profit."

Tanya knew she might just go berserk if they inadvertently bumped into her old party, so she'd intentionally waited until just past noon, when most people would be out running quests. Sure enough, the building was deserted, save for the woman sitting at the counter. *Perfect. Just as I predicted.*

"Hello there! Welcome to the Adventurers' Guild!" called the curvy, well-endowed counter clerk, smiling. She wore round, black-rimmed glasses, and her lavender hair was tied back into braids.

Tanya wasted no time getting to business. "We're here to register our party."

"And you want to register under the name Tanya Artemiciov, correct?"

“Yes, please.”

“Okay then! My name is Nadine Amaryllis, and I’ll be assisting you with your paperwork today.”

She handed Tanya a stack of papers to fill out, and it soon became apparent that there were a ridiculous amount of duplicate entry fields. *Ugh, how obnoxious.*

“This Adventurers’ Guild is a lot different than I was expecting. It’s very... dull.”

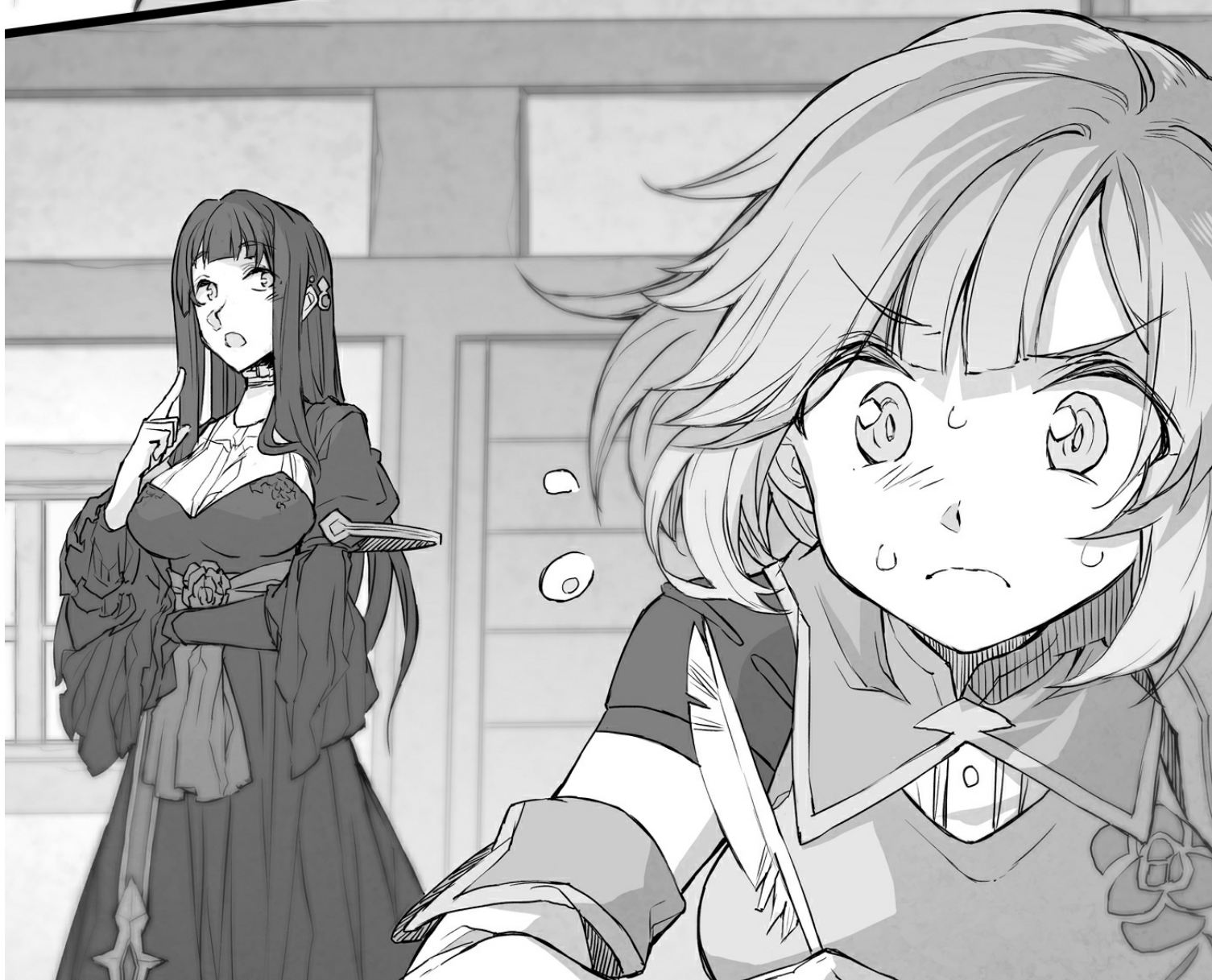
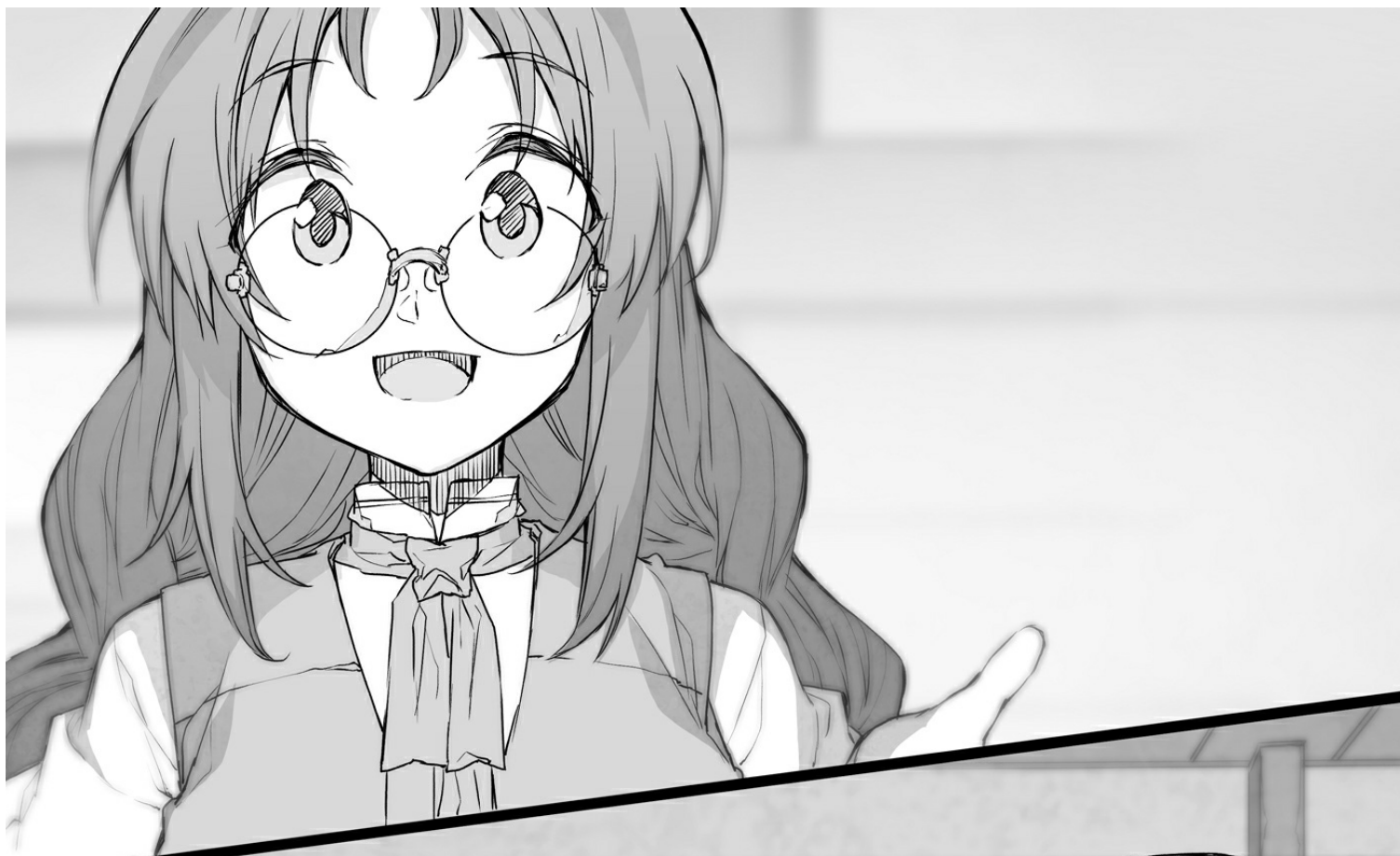
“Quit complaining! At least *you* don’t have to fill out this stupid paperwork—ack, I messed up!”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Just rewrite it and sign your initials next to the correction. There’s no rush.” Nadine smiled softly. From her mannerisms and tone of voice, it was clear she wasn’t being fake with them, and something about that felt really reassuring.

“Sorry... I’ll try to be more careful—AAAAHHH!”

“Uh-oh! Did you spill the ink? That’s okay! The entry fields are still legible, so just keep going!”

“Nngh... I’m really sorry...”



“It’s fine! Oh, Tanya, that part’s for me to fill out. Your section is over here.”

“Gah...!” Tanya was sweating bullets. In school she’d survived written tests through near-constant studying, but when it came to filling out forms, she was hopeless.

“Tanya, it just occurred to me... Are you secretly a major ditz?”

“Rude much?! I’ll have you know, I handled all the paperwork for my old party, okay?! At least I’m actually contributing, unlike you!”

“Now, now, don’t worry. I’m not going to think any less of you just because you’re useless at clerical work.”

“Hey! I’m not *useless* at it!”

“Hahaha... Now, now... no fighting, you two...”

Her anger somewhat mollified thanks to Nadine, Tanya progressed through the paperwork. By the time she was finished, she’d had to sign her initials for 24 different corrections.

“Hahahaha! Well done, Tanya! You’re the queen of mistakes!”

“Rrgh! I’m gonna wring your scrawny—”

“Mistakes are fine! We can fix them on our end,” Nadine insisted with a forced smile. “Now then, next we’ll need to evaluate your stats. Right this way, please.” She led them into another room, where a table with a crystal ball awaited them. “Tanya, you’ll go first. This stat evaluation is how we determine your party’s starting rank.”

“What’s this? Parties have ranks?” Laplace asked, puzzled.

“Indeed they do. This rank will affect your eligibility for certain quests as well as your reward money. Over time, your party will steadily rank up depending on member levels and Sparring Tournament results,” Nadine explained carefully. “Here at the Adventurers’ Guild, we encourage newly minted adventurers to join high-ranking, large-scale parties. It’s by no means uncommon to change parties or classes, but generally your rank will always be lower than the party or class you had originally.”

It was a smooth, polished lecture, one she'd probably given dozens of times before.

Party ranks generally functioned as follows:

At Ranks E and D—the lowest ranks—parties would generally be assigned to pick up litter around town or pick fruit from the nearby forest.

Next was Rank C, where Ryan's party was assigned. C was the most populated of the ranks, and it was here that adventurers were permitted to submit applications to explore basic-level dungeons. In addition, Rank C parties were often recruited by those of higher ranks to serve as backup mercenary forces.

Rank B parties earned the right to explore advanced-level dungeons.

At Ranks A and S, parties could be recruited to assist with national military operations.

And lastly, Rank SS parties were seen as elite imperial platoons. Supposedly they were given the same reverence as knight commanders or cabinet members.

As Nadine finished giving Laplace the full rundown, Tanya found herself mildly surprised. *This mousy little counter clerk really knows her stuff.*

"The sum total of your members' levels will go on to determine your party rank. Essentially, your personal level is equivalent to your proficiency in your class. Please note, in accordance with the Adventurers' Guild Regulations, Article 4, Section 2, we will be grading your level on a scale from 1 to 100."

"*C'est bon.* Fair warning, though—I'm pretty sure Tanya here is already at 100."

"Hahaha! I don't think anyone's ever actually reached level 100. In my experience, female Knights are generally somewhere between levels 20 and 30," Nadine replied. "Now then... Best of luck!"

6

Ten minutes later:

“...Y-Your party is Rank S,” Nadine stammered, her face pale and sweaty as she stared down at the sheet of paper in her hand containing the results of both Tanya’s and Laplace’s evaluations.

“Tanya, your evaluation has determined that you are indeed a Magi-Knight. And... and not only that... y-you’re *level 100*! That’s the max level!”

“Wait, what?! So Laplace wasn’t just babbling nonsense?!”

“...You thought I was *babbling nonsense*?”

“Well, you’re not supposed to make claims like that until you can prove it via Guild evaluation... so...”

Tanya reeled from this revelation. She hadn’t let herself believe she’d actually made it to an advanced-level class on Laplace’s word alone.

“It gets crazier! Next we have Laplace. As with Tanya, you’re at max level, but...”

“But?”

“Your class results are... oddly vague... You’re somewhere between a Shaman and a Mage... I’m honestly not sure! I’ve been working here for quite a while, and I’ve never seen results like these before!”

“Not surprising, honestly. I’m a Sorceress, after all.”

“What?”

“Laplace? Would you like to shut up, or would you like me to slam you into the wall again?”

“Nooo! No violence! Waaahhh!” The blabbermouth Sorceress darted away—or at least tried to, but because she was technically levitating, it looked like she was desperately treading water.

“A-Anyway! In light of your excellent evaluation results, your party has achieved Rank S!” Nadine exclaimed. “This is amazing... I need to inform the Adventurers’ Association... and the Imperial Bureau of Magic...!”

At this, Tanya realized something. Something critical.

“Oh, no... No no no no no!!! This is bad!!!”

“Huh?”

“Rank S parties can’t enter the Sparring Tournament!”

Indeed, the tournament was limited only to parties at Rank C or lower. If a Rank S party tried to enter, it would cause an outrage—after all, the power differential would be ridiculously unfair. And in order to get the ultimate revenge, Tanya needed to enter the tournament so she could humiliate Ryan in front of a giant audience.

Being given S Rank was extremely flattering and all, but if it was going to throw a wrench into her plans, then she couldn’t accept it.

“B-But...”

“Could you maybe... set our rank lower? No one’s watching! Just fiddle with the results or something!”

“You want me to *falsify the records*?!? That’s unacceptable and you know it!”
Leaning away from Tanya, Nadine cradled the result sheet protectively.

“Tsk...”

“Did you just cluck your tongue at me?!”

“Non, non. You’re hearing things, mademoiselle.”

Just then... Tanya struck upon a brilliant idea.

“Let’s see... Our rank is based on the party’s average level, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay then... How about this?”

Tanya pointed her finger in Nadine’s face.

“Wh-What?” Nadine blinked back.

“What level are you, Nadine?”

“Who, me? I... I’m not sure... I haven’t been evaluated since I graduated from adventuring school...”

“You’re an adventurer?!”

“Oh, well, um, t-technically? But my level was so low that none of the parties

wanted me... so I took a desk job instead...”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s get you measured!”

“What?! No, no, no—I—!”

“C’mooooon! Grab her other arm, Laplace.”

“Okie-dokie!”

“Eeek! What are you doing?!”

“Now just touch this thing real quick...”

Tanya took Nadine’s hand and forcibly pressed it to the crystal ball. A moment later, a message floated to the surface—

“*Level 3?*”

“Whoa...”

“There, are you happy now?! Thanks for humiliating me!” Nadine snapped, tears in her eyes.

Considering most aspiring adventurers made it to level 20 or so by the time they graduated, her level was extremely, *uncommonly* low. No wonder nobody took her into their party.

Meanwhile, Nadine collapsed on the spot. “Nnnn... Go ahead! Point and laugh at my failure! Everyone else already has!”

Little did she know that, to Tanya, she wasn’t a failure at all. She was *the perfect solution*.

“Alright! I’ve made up my mind!” Tanya extended her hand and helped Nadine back to her feet. “Nadine, I want you to join our party!”

Each party could enter up to three participants in the Sparring Tournament. Nadine was level 3. The average of 100 plus 100 plus 3 was 68. And the cutoff for Rank C was 70.

With Nadine’s cooperation, they could skirt the rules and position themselves at the same rank as Ryan’s party!

“I get it... Nobody wants a level 3 Healer in their... Wait, what?”

“I said I want you to join us! And I mean it!”

“...What?”

Tanya smirked. “Why don’t we talk about it over a few drinks?”

Trust me, there’s no better candidate than you!

7

“For now, we’ll consider this a tentative new member welcome party!” Tanya declared.

The three of them had arrived at the Little Vixen, Ode’s best-kept secret. The tavern was beloved for its comfort food; most noteworthy among them was the stew, generally considered to be the best thing on the menu. Plus, the drinks tasted like candy, so it was easy to get a little carried away.

Albino foxkin were notorious for their love of tofu, and the owner’s deep-fried tofu pita pockets were absolutely *divine*... Again, it was *dangerously* easy to get carried away here.

“If you think you can ply me with food, you’ve got another thing coming! I’m not that easily bought!” declared Nadine, Tanya’s chosen new party member candidate, her mouth full.

“Yes, yes, whatever you say. Now then, a toast!”

“Santé!”

“I’m warning you now, my stomach is a bottomless pit!” Seated between Tanya and Laplace, Nadine sighed and drained her stein of beer.

Obviously she was flattered that such a highly-ranked party would want her to join—over the moon, really. It was what she’d always dreamed of, after all. But she couldn’t just up and quit her job at the Guild.

Not that customer service was her *life’s calling* or anything, and she was paid less than her male coworkers for the same work. Whenever a party announced that they were accepting new member applications, she was the first to get in touch... but no one wanted a Healer who was only level 3. That was why she’d

settled for a desk job—at least it paid the bills.

But, she wasn't about to join some stranger's party just because they took her to dinner—

“You sure eat a lot, huh, Nadine?”

“Mmmph... Issh sho good!”

—but still, it couldn't hurt to eat what was on the table. To be polite, of course. Not like anyone was stopping her.

Munch, munch, munch. Sweet and sour pork—beef cheek stew—an entire roast copper pheasant—devoured.

Meanwhile, Tanya and Laplace were cheerfully eating to their hearts' content. They didn't seem like bad people... Maybe it'd be fun to be in a party with them...

But Nadine still had something she needed to take care of first.

“As much as I'd love to join... I'll only do so under one condition.”

“Wait, what?”

“I want to make a deal.”

Tanya's eyes went wide. Nadine had seemed far too innocent to be the conniving, deal-striking type, but evidently looks could be deceiving. This counter clerk was a strong-willed woman... that, and she could put away a whole table's worth of food.

What could she possibly want from them?

“As long as you don't ask us to commit crimes, sure!”

“Quite the opposite—you'd be helping someone in need. I want you to assist me with a Guild-related job,” Nadine explained.

Tanya tilted her head in contemplation. Surely Guild employees could place requests on the bulletin board at a discounted price. So why ask a newly minted party?

“I'm not sure how to put this, but... I feel like you're the only people I can ask,” Nadine continued.

Yeah, right. Totally not suspicious at all.

But before Tanya could finish pondering the matter, a very drunk Laplace giggled and shouted, “*Tres bien!* Just leave it to me!”

Evidently the Great Sorceress was an easy sell.

Chapter 4: They Artificially Lowered Her Test Scores, So We Went Ahead And Fixed That

1

“And you want *us* to be her private tutors?” Tanya asked over dessert.

Of all the demands Nadine could have made, Tanya never dreamed she’d ask them to tutor a little girl.

“I want you to help her pass the Imperial Magic Academy’s entrance exam.”

“The *Imperial Magic Academy*?!” Now *that* would pose one hell of a challenge. “Mmm... I don’t know...”

The Imperial Magic Academy was a revered institution in Pajan. It was one of just three magic academies in the entire nation, and it was by far the most elite.

In Pajan, certified Mages were treated as government employees, and Guild-affiliated Mages were no exception. They were required to obtain a diploma from either a public or private magic academy beforehand; that diploma would enable them to sit the yearly Mage Certification Exam. And *only* upon receiving your certification were you officially considered a Mage.

That certification was required to register at the Adventurers’ Guild, too. Without it, applicants were limited to either the Crafters’ Guild or the Merchants’ Guild. In short, that single certification made a world of difference when it came to wages... and the Imperial Magic Academy bridged the gulf.

This particular academy was so elite, their diplomas automatically doubled as Mage certificates. Talk about perks! Plus, because it was a government institution (hence “Imperial”), students could apply for financial aid directly from the national government.

In short—

“She wouldn’t have to pay much in tuition, that’s for sure...”

“Correct,” Nadine nodded. “I know the school receives a great deal of applicants every year, both within and outside of the country... and I know I’m asking a lot... but still, I want to help her.”

“What’s this all about, anyway?” Laplace asked, floating in midair with her dessert in one hand. “Why go to such great lengths for this particular girl? Ooh, this ice cream is delicious. Have some, Tanya!”

Ice cream aside, it was a valid question.

“Well, the thing is... Alisa’s an orphan.”

“Oh, that’s unfortunate.”

“But in order to take care of her younger siblings, she needs to land a job that pays women a decent amount. Hence, magic school.”

Makes sense. Poor thing.

“So she’s doing it to keep her family together.”

“Yeah. Granted, her parents left her with a decent inheritance, but it won’t last forever. She’s been going hungry so her siblings have enough to eat for dinner.”

“Oh, wow... Yeah, I’d definitely like to help her if I could... Wow, Laplace, you were right. This ice cream is amazing.” Cold, creamy, and sweet!

As for Nadine, she’d ordered a cup of herbal tea in place of dessert. She held the mug clutched in both hands. “It would... mean a lot to me,” she muttered, staring down at the bitter liquid. “If you can get her into that school, I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Hmmm...”

Tanya hesitated. She didn’t want to make any promises she wasn’t sure she could keep... but it was obvious just how deeply Nadine cared for these kids.

“...Alright. We’ll do it.”

The Imperial Magic Academy’s entrance exams were a formidable hurdle, but it was still worth a shot. After all, Tanya was an Academy alumna... and truth be told, Alisa’s story reminded her of her younger self.

Nadine led them to a neighborhood in a clearly unsafe part of town, where passersby routinely spat on the sidewalk. This was Ode's slum district.

At the end of the street, they found their client's "house"—at least, technically it was in the shape of a house—and a small girl walked out to greet them.

"Oh my gosh... There's a Mage at my house!!! Wow!!! Is this real life?!?"

The girl was shabbily dressed, her greasy hair cut into a bob. But more importantly—

"Holy hell, you're so young! How old are you?!"

"I'm twelve!"

"Good lord!"

In Tanya's eyes, she was practically a baby... but in this house there were no actual adults, so she was the next best thing.

"I'm prettier, though!" Laplace piped up from the back.

"No one cares, Laplace!"

"Sooo yeah, my name's Alisa. Nice to meet you." She set three mugs on the coffee table, one for each of her guests. "Sorry about the tea—it's the best I have."

And her "best" wasn't great. It tasted like water with food coloring in it. Squalid living, indeed. Still, someone clearly raised her properly at some point, since she had the social grace to offer them drinks at all.

"Miss Nadine's been really nice to me whenever I visit the Adventurers' Guild," she continued.

"She'd show up every single day to try to register with us, even though she knew she didn't meet the age requirements," Nadine explained.

"Wow, that sounds obnoxious."

“Laplace!”

SLAM!

“Owww...”

“Whoa! Are you okay, ma’am?! ...Listen, um, you don’t have to get mad at her! She was just being honest!” Alisa pleaded.

Just then, a series of tiny figures crept out from behind her.

“Awisa? Who’s dis?”

One, two, three, four... Four children, all identical to their older sister. Oh, and one of them was cradling a baby. Five children.

Startled, Laplace let out a shriek. “Wh-What’s going on here?!”

“Hi there, kids. Long time no see,” Nadine greeted them, waving.

“Iss Nadeena!”

“Yaaay! Will you pway wif us?!”

The children were all ecstatic to be reunited with Nadine. Evidently they liked her quite a bit, which suggested she came here with some frequency... Apparently this Guild counter clerk was the compassionate sort.

“Sorry, kids. I’m here to see Alisa today.”

“No fair!”

“Can’t you play with us later? Pleeeeease?”

Meanwhile, Tanya heaved a wistful sigh. *Reminds me of my younger siblings back home. It’s hard looking after so many kids.*

“Hey! Don’t be rude to our guests!” Alisa scolded. The bags under her eyes wouldn’t be out of place on someone thirty years her senior... Clearly she had the weight of the world on her shoulders.

“T-Tanya...!”

“Hmm?”

Laplace’s laughably pathetic wail drew Tanya’s attention. Glancing over her shoulder, she realized Laplace was trying to hide behind her. What happened to

her usual devil-may-care attitude? She was sweating bullets!

“What’s the problem, O Great Sorceress?”

“I... I’m not good with kids!”

“Oh yeah?”

“I don’t know how to interact with them!”

Tanya reached out—and karate chopped her on the head.

“Ow!”

“Guess what? How you feel about kids doesn’t matter!”

“...What?”

“Know why?” Tanya pressed a finger to Laplace’s dainty nose. “Because as of right now, you’re on babysitting duty!”

“Wait... what?! You’re joking! I have to *what*?!”

“You’re babysitting these kids, and that’s final. Remember what you said back in the wasteland? You promised you’d help me carry out my revenge, no matter what.”

“I mean, yeah, but—”

“Great! Now stay here and watch the house for us!”

“Nobody warned me about this!”

“Lest you forget, I have to help Alisa get into the Imperial Magic Academy. She and I are gonna need to go over a few things for the exam.”

“Wh-What about Nadine?!”

“Me? I work at the Guild today.”

As Laplace floundered, Alisa clasped her hands together. “I can’t believe it... A tutor *and* a babysitter?! Thank you so much!”

“*Non, non!* I never agreed to—”

But before she could finish, a tiny hand tugged at her skirt.

“Will you pway wif us, pwetty lady?”

“P-Pretty lady?!”

At this, Alisa clapped her hands in the air, calling attention to herself. “Listen up, kids! This *gorgeous* stone cold stunner is going to babysit you while I’m gone!”

Laplace twitched slightly. “Stone cold... stunner...?”

Tanya took one look at her flushed cheeks and grinned mischievously. “You all want this pretty lady to play with you, right, guys?”

“Yeah!!!”

“*C’est bon, d’accord!* I’ll do it!” Laplace thrust her chest out proudly. “I *am* a stone cold stunner, after all!”

“Yaaaay!” the children cheered.

Once again, the Great Sorceress was an easy sell.

“Alright, children! Today the lovely Laplace is in charge!” Laplace declared as the youngsters swarmed around her.

“Hey, Miss Laplace? How come your boobies are showing?”

“Because that’s my prerogative.”

“Per-what?”

“Oh, right. Of course you wouldn’t know that word. Basically, I’m allowed to wear whatever clothes I want.”

“You can wear *anything*?”

“Why, certainly! Just leave it to the Great Sorceress!”

Snap, snap, snap! In a blink, Laplace’s clothes changed from robes to a dress to a suit of armor to a showgirl outfit, and on and on... There were some costumes Tanya didn’t even recognize.

“Whoaaa! That’s so *coooooo!*!”

“Heh heh heh... I can change *your* clothes, too!”

The children all beamed excitedly at each other. Evidently she had won them

over in record time. For Tanya, it was a little touching to witness.

See, Laplace? I knew you had it in you.

Now it's time for me to tutor like my life depends on it!

3

Two weeks later...

Situated in North Ode was a certain nature park, its plaza a popular testing ground for Mages and Magi-Crafters alike. Today, however, two especially *enthusiastic* visitors had drawn the attention of everyone around them: Tanya and Alisa.

Here there were Mages of all kinds—dignified master Mages giving hard-faced lectures to their disciples, intermediate Mages showing off their spells and smirking around at everyone to make sure they were watching, wealthy Mages flaunting their top-of-the-line magical equipment—and in the middle there stood a female Knight with an oversized sword casting mid-tier spells while a tiny girl looked on fervently. Of course they were going to stick out.

Tanya canceled her current spell and smiled as Alisa let out a sigh. “You’re doing great, Alisa.”

Frankly, she was impressed. Alisa’s stamina, knowledge, and casting technique were all well above average, and in some areas, she was already on par with an Imperial Magic Academy incumbent. *We might just be able to pull this off!*

Once Alisa had caught her breath, she rounded on Tanya. “Please, *Sensei*, let me try again!”

“L-Look... You don’t have to call me ‘*Sensei*,’ okay?”

“Sure I do! You’re my teacher! And great teachers are worthy of respect!”

Alisa’s practical training had progressed smoothly.

Be it small amounts circulating through the body or large amounts circulating around the world, mana circuits were the foundation of all magic. It took a

certain level of prowess to pick up on that—and fortunately, Alisa possessed that aptitude.

“You must’ve really put a lot of practice into this, haven’t you?” Tanya mused as they were running through another practice round.

“Oh, no... I still have a long way to go, so...”

“Don’t downplay your efforts! You’ve worked hard, and you have the results to prove it.”

Tanya beamed at her, and she blushed. “Well... yeah... I guess...” she mumbled shyly, staring at the ground.

“Great stuff,” Tanya nodded to herself. “Really great.”

The entrance exams would surely be a formidable hurdle, but not an insurmountable one. At the rate they were going—

“This might actually work out.”

“What was that, *Sensei*?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Right as break time rolled around, they spotted a familiar pair of lavender braids in the distance.

“Tanya! Alisa!” It was Nadine, and she was carrying sandwiches in both hands.

“Hiya, Nadine!”

“I got permission to take a long lunch today, so I thought I’d stop by.” She smiled softly, and in that moment, she almost seemed like Alisa’s actual sister.

As much as I’d love to join... I’ll only do so under one condition. It was a bold demand and unexpected from this seemingly mild-mannered counter clerk. *What a peculiar young woman we have here,* Tanya thought. And more peculiar still: the “wicked” Great Sorceress and her carefree levitation magic. To Tanya, both of them were equally inscrutable.

Oh, and this sandwich is the bomb. I’m really digging this tangy whole grain mustard!

Nadine must’ve bought them from one of the food stands on the main street.

Tanya herself often bought lunch there on her days off. But those food stands were quite a walk from the Adventurers' Guild; she would've had to go pretty far out of her way to pick one up.

"Thank you for buying lunch, Miss Nadine," said Alisa as she munched on her veggie sandwich. She must've been starving, because she polished it off quickly without another word.

Quietly, Nadine handed her a second one... the one she'd intended to eat herself. Tanya swallowed her envy along with the bite of food in her mouth.

"So, how's your training going?"

"Oh, it's going great! Miss Tanya is an awesome teacher, just like I knew she would be! After all, she's the legendary lady Mage who graduated from the Academy at the top of her class!"

"Wait, what?! Who told you that?!" *You're gonna make me blush!*

"All the girls were talking about you when I went to turn in my application form. They were like, 'If we work hard like Tanya Artemiciov, no one will judge us for being female Mages!'"

"Wow, that's... kinda nifty. Thanks," Tanya stammered.

Obviously she couldn't exactly tell her that some *fucking sexist asshole* ultimately "judged" her right out of her party, but yeah.

"Knowledge is power. And it never hurts to be powerful, no matter what gender you are."

"Right! I want to be just like you so I can keep my little siblings safe, you know? And once I'm a Mage, I'm sure I can take care of an entire household on my own, so..."

"So you need to pass that entrance exam."

"Right!" Alisa's eyes lit up.

Meanwhile, Nadine reached over and stroked her hair. "We're all here to support you, Alisa."

"Thank you! I'll be sure to work extra hard after lunch, too!"

“Alrighty then! We’ll start off by having you practice your magic circles!”

“Right you are, *sensei!*”

As Alisa jumped to her feet, Nadine waved goodbye and headed back to work. And for a moment, Tanya wondered: why exactly did Nadine ask her to do this?

4

One night, a few days later...

“Waaaahh! I’m *tiiired!* Why should a Great Sorceress have to babysit *children?*! Is this my punishment?!” Laplace wailed as she flung herself down upon her hotel bed.

“Punishment for *what*, genius?”

“For being too beautiful?”

“Congrats, that makes absolutely no sense.” Tanya rolled her eyes. *If anything, I bet THEY’RE the ones babysitting YOU.*

They were wearing the matching nightgowns they’d bought in town together—sunflower yellow for Tanya and marine blue for Laplace. Tanya was never really the nightgown-wearing type, and this frilly style was more to Laplace’s taste than hers, but she was reluctantly convinced after Laplace pointed out that “wearing cute matching pajamas will make us feel more like a real party!”

It was baffling just how childish this “Great Sorceress” could be. Who in their right mind would think to use a weather manipulation spell *just* to dry her hair after a shower? Tanya had tackled her purely on reflex. Then, using her magical fan, she’d dried and brushed Laplace’s long, dark, silky hair for her. *Honestly, what an overgrown baby.*

Just then, a question occurred to her. “Hey, Laplace?”

“What is it, Tanya?”

“Why do you think Nadine cares about Alisa so much?” *If you’re some almighty Sorceress, then let’s hear your take.*

“Good question. Beats me,” she replied flippantly.

Tanya's face fell. "Oh... I figured Laplace the Great-Ancient-Beautiful-Sorceress would have an answer, but I guess not."

"Actually, that reminds me. The kids were telling me how Alisa kept going to the Guild every day after their parents died. Apparently she was looking for a Mage to take her in as an apprentice."

Laplace was easily bribed, as usual.

"Oh, really? Wow."

"*Oui, oui.* Not that any of those incompetent losers could've taught her anything, of course."

"Pretty much anyone would look incompetent next to a chick who can *levitate and manipulate the weather*, shit!"

"Anyway, after a few months of daily visits, she'd exhausted the entire Mage directory, and everyone had turned her down. Some of them even physically threw her out of their houses. She'd have to walk all the way home covered in scrapes and bruises."

"People got violent with her?!" Whoever these Mages were, they'd have to be total scum to manhandle a tiny twelve-year-old girl.

"Yeah. Meanwhile, she was working whatever odd jobs she could get in order to make ends meet. The kids would beg her not to go back to the Guild, but she'd go anyway. Then one day she met Nadine, and the rest is history."

God... How could they do that to such a brave and talented girl?!

This left only one question:

"Wait, but... I was there at the Guild, too..." *So why didn't Alisa ever approach me?*

"Hmmm... I imagine she must've thought a trailblazing female Mage like you would never give her a passing look. If only she'd had the courage to talk to you, maybe things could have been different... What a shame," Laplace sighed.

"Surely an upstanding, virtuous Mage like you would have never overlooked the value of hard work."

"Right..."

And yet somehow Tanya had overlooked Alisa all the same. Perhaps she never really paid that much attention; after all, it wasn't until *after* she was booted from her old party that she bothered to learn the counter clerk's name.

"Alisa really wanted to be like you, you know. The kids told me all about it."

"...She did?"

"Of course! You're one of only a very few women who managed to graduate from the Imperial Magic Academy at the top of their class. I'm sure lots of girls wish they were you!"

"Oh, please..."

"Anyway, all jokes aside..." Laplace leaned in, drawing her pretty face close to Tanya's.

"Nngah...!" Tanya yelped nervously. *What?! What is it?! Why are you so forward with me—I mean, why do you keep kissing me all the time?! Do you do this with everyone you meet?! Wait! Slow down!*

Curved in a gentle smile, Laplace's perfect lips were now mere inches from hers. Tanya squeezed her eyes shut.

"Wait—don't—!"

"*Détends-toi, ma belle.* There's nothing to be afraid of," Laplace whispered, her low voice tickling Tanya's ears.

"Aah!"

Then something soft pressed against her lips.

"Mmm... La...place...! Mmmph!"

When their tongues touched, for some reason, she could feel Laplace's mana flowing into her. *How does she do that?*

"Oh, Tanya... You're such a softie, aren't you?"

"Nnn..." Her body felt warm and fuzzy. Suddenly, a wave of drowsiness washed over her, and her eyelids drooped.

"Listen here, Tanya. I know you've been staying up late, sacrificing sleep to correct Alisa's homework. Trust me, I can see right through you."

“...exam... ’s comin’ up soon...”

“Ever the dutiful teacher, I see. You know we could always find someone else to join our party... so why are you so fixated on Nadine in particular?”

“...mmm... ’cuz... uh...”

Because when Nadine stated her conditions, she didn’t ask for money or items. She asked for help on someone else’s behalf—specifically, a little girl with dreams of becoming a Mage. How could Tanya possibly say no to that? It was practically cheating. Of *course* she’d want to help.

Eyelids... so heavy...

“Don’t you also have a revenge plot to carry out?”

Yeah, but... I gotta... grade her homework... and plan tomorrow’s lesson...

“You’ll need all the sleep you can get.”

She could smell Laplace’s natural scent. A dignified floral fragrance... lilies, perhaps. Her consciousness drifted.

“...Zzzz...”

Somewhere in the distance, she thought she heard Laplace’s voice:

Sweet dreams, Tanya. I’m so proud of my hard worker.

5

Examination day had finally arrived, and now an elegant chalk building towered above them. This was the Imperial Magic Academy campus.

Tanya and Laplace stood just outside the school gates with Alisa’s siblings in tow. Unfortunately Nadine couldn’t make it due to work obligations, but she told them to give Alisa her best wishes all the same.

As for Alisa, she was currently inside that building, sitting the exam.

There were plenty of other people waiting outside with them—mostly upper-class servants or affluent merchant couples. Hence, Tanya and her ragtag band of misfits stuck out like a sore thumb.

Here, the barrier to entry would not be merciful. It, too, towered above them.

“Look! There’s Alisa!” shouted one of Alisa’s younger brothers, clinging to Laplace’s shoulder as she levitated just a finger’s length off the ground.

“Alisa!”

“Sensei! Oh jeez, what are you all doing here?!”

Alisa jogged over, and from the look on her face, Tanya knew.

“I think I passed.”

At this, everyone let out a sigh of relief.

“Awisa, awe you gonna be a Mage?” her little sister asked innocently.

“She sure is! Your big sister is on her way to joining yours truly in the realm of spellcasting!” Laplace grinned.

They had done everything within their mortal capabilities. Now all they could do was wait... and pray.

Just then, a goofy voice shouted: “Hey, little girl! (lol)”

They turned to find a boy about Alisa’s age standing there, dressed in a young nobleman’s finery. Quick summary: chubby, blond, shorts.

“Uhhh... Did you need something?”

“Hmph! I overheard your conversation. I’ll bet you’re so proud of yourself, aren’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

The boy snorted. “How ridiculous to see *females* trying to attend the Imperial Magic Academy. Whew... Feels good to get that off my chest.”

“Oh dear, he really shouldn’t be wearing that outfit,” Laplace snickered.

“It’s not nice to judge people on their appearance, Laplace. At least save it for when he’s not around.”

Meanwhile, the boy continued talking as though he’d failed to notice how uncomfortable he was making their group.

Then Alisa looked up suddenly. "Sensei!"

"Hmm?"

"This guy sat the exam with me just now. During the written portion, he got in trouble with the proctor for looking around too much. And he was a total mess during the practical exam, too. So how come he's so confident?"

"Who knows. Maybe he's on the verge of a breakdown and he's trying to keep himself together."

"What are you people whispering about? Whatever. Seeing as you apparently don't know how things work around here, allow me to fill you in."

"Oh yeah?" *Who the hell is this kid, and why is he bothering us?*

Tanya tilted her head skeptically. Alisa squinted dubiously. Laplace was still snickering. And yet somehow, despite the extreme "yikes" vibe, the boy *still* pressed on.

"My uncle's on the board of directors, and he told me they can't have too many females passing the entrance exams!"

"...What does gender have to do with it?" Alisa asked, confused.

The boy snorted again. "Wow, you really are ignorant. If the whole town gets overrun with girl Mages, just think of the problems it'll cause for the Guild and the Imperial Magic Association! That's why they have to regulate it!"

"Regulate it?"

Regulate it? It took a minute for that to sink in. *What do you mean, regulate it? It's a hard test, but whoever passes gets in, right? Why would they need to regulate that?*

"I mean exactly what I said. Every girl examinee gets some points docked. I forget exactly how many... Ten? Twenty? Of course, you can better your chances by making donations. Obviously *I* don't have to worry, since my father is the Count of the Nine Southern States, but as for you *poor people*, I wouldn't hold my breath."

WHAT? Tanya balled her hands into fists and glared at Chubby Blond Shorts. "What are you talking about?!"

“Eeeek! M-My point is, that chick isn’t gonna pass!” Tanya’s loud voice had made him flinch, but he carried on smugly nonetheless. “She sure made me look stupid, by the way. I should’ve been the best in our group, but no, she just *had* to bust out all the intermediate and advanced spells! Don’t worry—I already told my uncle all about her!”

Tanya took a deep breath. “So you’re saying... they make the test harder for women specifically?” she asked quietly, in a tone of forced calm.

Oblivious to the murderous rage oozing from her every pore, Chubby Blond Shorts Aristo-Brat smirked knowingly. “Yeah, pretty much! It’s just the way things work when you’re part of the elite. For a girl, you’d have to be a *genius* to ace the Imperial Magic Academy’s entrance exam, and there’s only ever been one of those around here—Tanya Artemiciov, that one freak of nature who somehow graduated at the top of her class. But even *she* wouldn’t stand a chance against a real man like me!”

“Pffft. (lol)”

Laplace burst out laughing. The little boy on her shoulder giggled, too. They didn’t seem angry in the least.

Clenching her fists, Tanya exhaled slowly. She could see the humor in this situation, of course, but it really wasn’t a laughing matter.

“Wh... What’s your problem, goth chick?!”

“Pfffhaha! A genius *and* a freak of nature! It seems you’ve got quite the reputation, Tanya!”

“...Huh?”

The Aristo-Brat stared at Tanya, mouth agape. Behind him, his servants exchanged “*oh shit*” looks and quietly retreated into the carriage. Chubby Blond Shorts didn’t notice this.

“W-Wait, so... you’re...?”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Tanya Artemiciov.”

“Huh-whuh?!”

Ashen, the Aristo-Brat stumbled backwards and fell onto his rear. The sight

irritated her. *Cowards like you ought to keep your heads down and your mouths shut, you pathetic little boy.*

“But... but then why are you wearing a Knight’s armor?!”

“I just changed classes. To a Magi-Knight, actually.”

Chubby Blond Shorts leapt to his feet. “M-Magi-Knight?! The *master-level class*?!”

At this, even Alisa couldn’t help but snicker. *Thank goodness*, Tanya thought to herself. She’d been worried that this conversation had crushed her little spirit, but evidently not. Still... it had probably been hard for her to hear.

I can’t let this sexist world beat her down. It’s time to show her what it really means to fight like a girl!

“P-Prove it! I won’t be cowed by your lies! Show me proof that you’re the real Tanya Artemiciov!”

“You want proof, eh?” An idea struck her. “Alright then... how’s this for *proof*?!”

Whipping her sword off her back, she plunged it into the ground where they stood.

“Gyaahh!”

In a flash, a sheet of frost spread outward from her blade.

“Wh... No incantation?!”

“I summon thee! Icicle Prison!”

“Gaaaaahhh!!!”

In a blink, Chubby Blond... (you know the rest) was trapped in an icy cage.

“Just wondering, but is all that stuff you said true?” Tanya asked, wearing her best, brightest smile.

“Y-Yesh...?”

“Ah, I see. Okay, well, FUCK THAT!”

“Eeeek!” Chubby Blond... (cont’d.) squealed as Tanya drew close.

“Can I ask one last thing?”

“Shure...?”

“This cool uncle of yours... what’s his name, pray tell?”

“Gyah!” He caved immediately. “M-My uncle is the head of the p-proud and d-distinguished Gan family! Dan Gan! Impressed much?!”

Dan Gan. “Aha. Yes, I know that lowlife,” Tanya mused, a smug smirk on her face.

Dan had served as an academy director all throughout her days at the Academy. When it was announced that she would be valedictorian of her graduating class, he came up to her and said, “You know, you’ll scare all the boys away if you keep showing off like that.” In other words, just your bog-standard sexist creep.

He had no particular talent or impressive accomplishments under his belt—just a wealthy family. At the time, she’d wondered how someone so painfully mediocre could’ve acquired such a prestigious position with the Academy, but now it made sense. He must’ve had connections who could pull a few strings.

Regardless, as far as Tanya was concerned, he could fuck off and die. To put it mildly.

“Heh heh... heh heh heh...” Tanya chuckled darkly. As she pulled her sword from the ground, the Icicle Prison shattered like glass. She no longer had any use for this Aristo-Brat. He’d probably learned his lesson; no sense in scaring him to death.

“Whuh?!” Chubby... (cont’d.) flinched as the ice came down all around him. “Uhh... w-well... I won’t forget this!” he wailed as he ran off with his tail between his legs, all the way back to his fancy carriage. The fact that none of his servants had come to his rescue spoke volumes of his popularity back home.

“Oh my gosh, Sensei! You’re so badass!” Alisa exclaimed, eyes sparkling. “I can’t believe you stood up to a noble!”

Meanwhile, everyone in the vicinity was looking at her with awe. But Tanya fell silent—and the look on her face suggested she was about to cause some

real mischief.

Laplace noticed this right away, of course. “Hahahaha! Oh, Tanya, I know exactly what you’re thinking. You’ve got *plans* for tonight, don’t you?” she asked, beaming like a child on Christmas morning.

“Yeah... After this, I think our new friend’s going to start sleeping with one eye open.”

She smiled as Laplace laughed even harder.

All the effort Tanya had put into mastering *all* those spells—and this asshole was going around reducing test scores on the basis of gender? There was no way Tanya, of all people, could let such reprehensible behavior continue.

So she continued plotting, Laplace continued laughing, and the kids all cheered.

“Just you wait! I’m gonna tell my uncle on youuuu!!!” Chu... (cont’d.) wailed as his carriage rolled away.

Unfortunately, nobody noticed or cared.

6

That night, at midnight, a conversation was taking place deep within the Imperial Magic Academy regarding tomorrow’s exam results announcement. A group of old men spoke in hushed tones, gathered together in a tightly shuttered room.

“This ‘Alisa’ girl has scored quite high.”

“Odd. There are no records of her attending any of the local prep schools.”

“Perhaps she studied under an exceptionally talented Mage...?”

“Hmmm... Possibly. You know, we’re seeing a steady increase in female examinees lately, and we all know they have the advantage when it comes to oral exams and verbal communication in general... I hate to say it, but it’d be unfair to the other students to let Alisa in, don’t you think?”

“Hah hah hah! My thoughts exactly! These women will all just retire in a few

years anyway!”

“Indeed. Plus, male students are typically late bloomers—I’m sure they’ll improve eventually. But for now, it appears we’ll need to regulate the results again this year.”

“Very well. In keeping with past years, let’s dock an even twenty points from each female,” declared the chairman, Dan Gan.

The very next moment, all the lights in the room were simultaneously extinguished.

This caused quite a stir among the men. They were in the deepest part of the Academy building—an impregnable shelter with layers of magical barriers, designed to house the imperial royal family in the event of an emergency.

But someone had found their way in.

“You really shouldn’t have let the Great Sorceress hear that, you know. *But I diiiiid*,” called an eerily singsong voice. A woman’s voice.

“Wh-Who’s there?!”

“That’s right. We heard every last word of that. Girls have the advantage in oral exams because of our verbal communication skills? We’re all just going to run off and quit our jobs? And this is somehow a valid reason to lower people’s test scores? Do you think this is a fucking *joke*?” asked another woman, her voice shaking with anger. “Women don’t *choose* to be like this. The world around us *forces* us to ‘grow up’ when we’re still children—oh, but *men* get to be ‘late bloomers’? Take your twenty points and SHOVE THEM UP YOUR ASS!”

As her voice shook the room, the other, softer voice chimed in, “Yes, it appears you’ve ‘royally fucked up,’ as it were. And this the Great Laplace shall not abide.”

The men began to whimper. “L-Laplace?! Who are you people?! You dare speak the name of the Wicked Dragonwhore?!”

Two women quietly appeared from behind the tightly drawn curtains. How could they have gotten in through those firmly shuttered windows?

One was dressed all in black, with long, glossy, raven-black hair—darkness

personified. Like a shadow, she floated idly in midair. The men gasped. Levitation magic? Impossible. No human alive could possibly use such overpowered sorcery. Not here in Pajan, anyway.

And as for the other—

“Eeeek!”

She was a Knight, carrying a sword on her back the length of her entire body. Her hair was pale pink, and she was smiling—but the smile didn’t reach her eyes, which were burning with unbridled fury as she cracked her glove-covered knuckles.

“I know you. You’re—!”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m Tanya Artemiciov, the woman who *dared* to graduate at the top of her class.”

Fwump! Tanya swung her sword down hard, unleashing a razor-sharp gust of air that slashed at the men’s clothes.

“Was that... Wind Blade?!”

“With no incantation?! And that sword... No, it can’t be! You’re... a Magi-Knight?!”

“S-Someone hel—mmmpphh?!”

A light *snap* echoed across the room, and the cry for help was extinguished. What kind of spell was *that*? And how could she perform it with no incantation or casting time? The old men stared in shock.

Next, Tanya plunged her sword into the floor, unleashing an Icicle Prison—no incantation, natch—and all the while her smile never wavered for an instant, as though it were plastered onto her face.

“Now then, about this ‘regulation’ shit. You’re going to promise me you’ll never, *ever* try to do this again... or else we’ve got a *loooong* night ahead of us. Oh, and you’ll need to pull up everyone you’ve unfairly denied and enroll them, too. You wouldn’t want me to get angry, right?” A vein bulged in her forehead as she chuckled.

Beside her, Laplace grinned like the Cheshire Cat, enjoying the festivities. She

snapped her fingers... and outside the window, a streak of lightning shot across the sky as a violent storm suddenly rolled in.

“Oh dear, Laplace, how could you? Now no one can hear them scream.”

“Oui, oui. It’s time to get this party started.”

The men stood rooted to the spot as despair washed over each and every one of them.

“Mmmph... mmmgghhh!”

And by the time the night was over... well, some things are better left unsaid.

The next morning, the Imperial Magic Academy board of directors stumbled out, knees quaking, to deliver the “List of Passing Candidates (Undoctored)” and “List of Erroneously Miscategorized Passing Candidates” to the office clerk. The moment these two lists were placed in the clerk’s hands, the men all began to froth at the mouth until they passed out.

When asked, not a single one of them, Dan Gan included, could explain what had happened to them. All they could manage to say was...

“S-Snitches get stitches...!”

7

“As of today, I’m officially joining your party. Thank you for having me,” said Nadine, inclining her head respectfully. Gone was her counter clerk uniform; now she wore adventurers’ gear.

“Welcome to the party!”

“Bienvenue, mademoiselle!”

They had already registered with the Guild as a three-member party:

Tanya, Magi-Knight, Level 100.

Laplace, Mage(?), Level 100++.

Nadine, Healer... Level 3.

Party level: 67.

“Now we’re Rank C! And that means we can enter the tournament!” Tanya thrust her fists into the air victoriously. *Fuck yeah!*

“Oh, that reminds me. Alisa and her siblings came by the Guild on my last day... They wanted me to give you this.” Nadine took a letter out of her bag... along with a single flower.

To: Tanya and Friends

I never would’ve made it into the Imperial Magic Academy without all of you. Miss Nadine, you were always there for me when I needed you. Miss Laplace, thank you for babysitting my brothers and sisters. And Tanya-sensei, thank you for everything.

I love you all so, SO much, and I hope someday I can stand on equal ground with all of you as a fellow adventurer.

—Alisa

“She actually made it in... Tanya, you’re really something, you know that?” Nadine remarked.

“Who, me? Nahhh,” Tanya demurred. She could feel her face growing hot. *Jeez, don’t embarrass me, you dork!*

“Hey, what’s that supposed to be?!” Laplace pointed over Tanya’s shoulder at a childish doodle tucked away in one corner of the stationery. Long, black hair... a black dress... and ample cleavage...

P.S. One of my siblings drew Laplace! Isn’t it cute?

“No, it isn’t! I’m at least a hundred times cuter than this!”

“Oooh, someone’s blushing!”

“Non, non! I’m not blushing!”

“Are too!”

“Am not!”

Meanwhile, Nadine was busy filling out the party registration paperwork (since Tanya was so incredibly bad at it). And when she was done, she would

walk into her former workplace to turn it in. What a strange feeling.

“Let’s see... What shall our party name be?” Nadine asked the others.

“Good question... Uhhh...”

Tanya glanced around until her eyes eventually settled on the single lily Alisa had sent with her letter.

“You know, I started this party to kick ass and get revenge, but... it can’t hurt to have a pretty name, right?”

She gazed down at the untarnished white petals.

“Our party name will be... Liliu.”



Chapter 5: A Declaration of War

1

Tanya was in a spectacularly good mood. Not only was Nadine now an official party member, but Alisa had passed her entrance exams. This was cause for celebration!

“Wahahaha! New friend, new friend!”

“Tanya, wipe that sinister smirk off your face!”

“Why should I? I’m a femme fatale, out for revenge! I’m evil, I tell you! Gahahaha!”

“Shhh! Tanya! Keep your voice down!”

“*Oui, oui*. Nadine’s right, you know. You’re being *far* too loud. Drunk already, are we?”

Together they ate, drank, and made merry. Nadine wasn’t much of a drinker; instead, she ate four whole herb-roasted pheasants. But even then, she still didn’t hold a candle to Laplace, who ordered one of everything off the menu and devoured it all with relish. Meanwhile, Tanya downed her tankard of ale, savoring the taste of alcohol bought with her own hard-earned money. All in all, it was a sumptuous feast, until—

“Yikes!” a familiar voice called out.

“Huh?” Tanya turned to look.

There, standing in the doorway of the Little Vixen, was a woman she didn’t recognize... on the arm of a man she very much *did*.

“It’s *you*.” All at once, the drunken stupor cleared from her mind. “Ryan.”

Sure enough, there stood Ryan, her longtime friend and former party leader—the same man who had fired her. “Hi, Tanya,” he replied, grimacing awkwardly.

“What the...?” Tanya balled her fists and shifted her gaze. “Who the hell is

this chick?!”

The woman standing beside him was fairly young... and a Mage, judging from her equipment. Tall, slim, and blonde—*definitely Ryan’s type, alright*. And while female adventurers’ clothes were all one kind of skimpy or another, hers were particularly tasteless.

A pair of pointy ears sat atop her head, and after a moment, Tanya realized she was a beastkin.

The woman tilted her head in a show of confusion. “Hey, Ryan? Who’s this?” she asked in a simpering voice.

“Oh, sorry Katherine. Remember that old friend of mine I was telling you about?”

“You mean that extremely butch Mage woman you got rid of?”

“Yeah, this is her.”

“Ooh, *interesting*,” she sneered, staring smugly at Tanya. And as for Tanya, well, she was smart enough to put two and two together.

“You fired me... and hired a *different* female Mage...?”

“No, no! You’ve got the wrong idea.”

Oh yeah? Which part of what I said is wrong, exactly? Enraged, her blood ran cold. “You fired me... so you could put your *girlfriend* in the party...?”



Ryan laughed dismissively. When they were young, he'd always put on this dopey, boyish grin whenever he was trying to get out of trouble—and it worked, too. Tanya *hated* that stupid smile. *Fuck off!*

“Katherine just *really* wanted to join our party, that’s all. Isn’t that right, Katherine?”

“Right you are, Ryan,” Katherine drawled. Her voice was so syrupy and saccharine, she was obviously doing it on purpose... but her gaze was pointedly fixed anywhere but at them, and she was batting her lashes.

Tanya recognized this signal. Five blinks: “I want to leave.” But Ryan hadn’t noticed.

Evidently this Katherine woman was fairly adept at making use of her personal connections.

“Trust me, I have no ulterior motive for doing this. If anything, well... she’s a junior adventurer, and someone ought to be there to show her the ropes, that’s all!”

Nice try, but I can see your arm around her waist, you liar! You’re just SO pleased with yourself, aren’t—HEY! Quit smiling at each other like that, damn it!

Tanya’s face flushed with rage.

“Interesting. He’s even worse than you described,” Laplace murmured under her breath as she scooped up another spoonful of sorbet.

No kidding.

“Oh, I know!” Ryan shouted suddenly.

“...What?”

“Tanya, I could be wrong, but...”

“Spit it out, Ryan.”

“You’re jealous, aren’t you?”

“...WHAT?!” Jealous?! How on earth did this moron arrive at THAT conclusion?!

“You were secretly in love with me, weren’t you? You can admit it.”

“Wh... Fuck you!” Tanya screamed. *Have you lost your mind?!*

“I admit, you might be a better Mage than Katherine, but when it comes to women, talent’s got nothing on hotness. Am I right?”

“Yep! Hotness all the way,” Katherine replied at his prompting, though her gaze was directed at her hands. Apparently she was more interested in her nails.

“And no offense, Tanya, but you’ve always been kind of a bitch. This Mage thing you’re doing? It’s not cute or endearing. But Healers? Anyone can be a Healer! You just need to change classes, join a new party, and get a boyfriend. That’s the whole reason I fired you,” Ryan explained without a hint of irony.

Ugh, my chest feels like lead.

“...up.”

“I mean, you chicks only do this adventurer stuff to find husbands, right?”

“Sh...”

“And most girls tend to act quickly, y’know, while they’re still young.”

“Shut up...”

Most girls. This struck a nerve.

“Huh? What was—?”

“I SAID *SHUT THE FUCK UP!*” Tanya roared. She put her hand on the hilt of the Not-Excalibur affixed to her back and focused her energy on the mana circuits in her legs.

Wind Magic, engage!

She dashed forward, straight at Ryan.

“Eegh?!” Ryan yelped in terror. Then he felt the chill of a giant blade gently touch the back of his neck, and for a moment, his brain failed to process what had happened. It all happened so fast, his first thought was teleportation magic.

It took him several seconds before he even noticed someone was behind him

—and even longer to realize that person was Tanya. Somehow she wielded that giant-sized sword with the grace of a natural, and now she was oozing hostile intent as she held it right against his neck.

At last, he finally understood what had happened... and his legs gave out.

As he collapsed to the floor, Katherine let out a scream. “What was *that*?!”

“That was me almost killing him,” Tanya replied mechanically. And with a deep breath, she lowered the Not-Excalibur.

“No fighting in the restaurant!” a waitress yelled angrily.

“Wh... You... That sword... You changed classes?!”

“Yep.”

“Why would you do that?! You already couldn’t get a date as a Mage! No guy will wanna date some burly Knight chick!”

Tanya took a deep breath, turned to Ryan, and screamed at the top of her lungs:

“I’M NOT DOING THIS SO MEN WILL LIKE ME, YOU FUCKING OCTOPUS!”

“Get ‘em, girl!” Laplace cheered in the background as she started in on her second bowl of ice cream.

“Octopus?!” Ryan yelped.

“You’re right—I take it back. Even that’s too generous for a worm like you.” Tanya looked down her nose at him, her eyes as cold as ice. “Ryan.”

“Wh-What?”

“I’m going to enter my party into the next Sparring Tournament.”

“You have a party? And you’re entering the tournament? Is that even allowed?”

“Cram it! You better be there, because I’m gonna make you wish you were never born!”

Much as she was tempted to destroy him here, that priceless moment would be better spent in the arena, where she could humiliate him and make him beg

for his life in front of a giant crowd. After everything he'd said and done to belittle her efforts over the years, he deserved her revenge in full.

"Wha...?!"

Silence fell. The other patrons all stared at them.

Then Ryan clucked his tongue and got to his feet. "Fuck it, Katherine. Let's go somewhere else. I've had it with this place."

"O-Okay..."

Tanya glared after him. Once upon a time, that was her best friend. Together, they'd dreamed of going on adventures—*no, don't cry. Not here. Don't let him win.*

"...This is why you're going to die an old maid," Ryan spat as he walked out the door.

Even after everything that just happened, it was clear he still only saw her as a *mere woman* and nothing more.

"Yeah, an old maid that can *kick your pathetic ass!* GO FUCK YOURSELF!" she yelled after him.

Surely he saw the difference in their power levels. Her biggest advantage as a Magi-Knight came from her mana capacity and proficiency, and she was confident that her overwhelming talent as a Mage would more than make up for her lack of experience as a Knight. Surely she could beat him... Hell, she could've lopped his head off just now...

"I'm gonna crush you. That's a promise," Tanya muttered to no one. She bit her lip in frustration.

Just then, she felt someone hug her gently from behind.

"There, there. I'm proud of you for holding yourself back, Tanya."

"Thanks, Laplace."

"Yeah, um, I think I understand why you have to get revenge on that person. It sounds like he made your life absolutely miserable."

"Thanks, Nadine."

“Why don’t we drink some more? This time I’ll join you.”

“Oui, oui! I was just about to order another cup of sorbet anyway.”

“You’re STILL hungry?!”

“But of course! And you know what they say—you can’t... something... on an empty stomach!” Laplace beamed.

Party member #1: Laplace, an ancient Sorceress.

“That Mage woman just now, Katherine... She was in my class at adventuring school, and... well, I don’t know how to put this, but... I’m disappointed to see how she’s ended up.”

Party member #2: Nadine, a former Guild counter clerk.

God, I’m so happy to have you both here with me.

“Let’s make a toast! To this exciting tale of revenge that has only just begun!”

At this, Tanya smiled. She was completely sober again... *Yeah, maybe I should have one more glass of wine.*

She balled her hand into a fist.

As of tonight, she had declared war, and now there was no backing down.

2

The waxing gibbous moon hung high in the night sky. Laplace, however, didn’t know the proper terms for the lunar phases—those were established *after* her time. To her, it was just “slightly less than full.”

She stood on the balcony of her hotel room. Up there on the top floor, it felt like the moon was just a tiny bit closer. The night air felt good against her skin.

“Hey, um... Laplace?”

Behind her stood Nadine Amaryllis, their newest companion.

“Hi, Nadine. Did you get Tanya into bed? *Merci beaucoup, mon ami.*”

The other woman nodded. “She got a bit too drunk tonight, didn’t she?”

“Hahaha! *A bit* is an understatement.”

After “declaring war” against Ryan, Tanya had downed drink after drink. Eventually, the conversation turned to the subject of Nadine herself.

At Level 3, she’d had a miserable time looking for work. Everywhere she went, people had assumed that, because she was a woman, she would probably quit her job a few months in. Granted, her extremely low level was fairly uncommon—but nonetheless, she knew men with similar stats got adventuring gigs with little difficulty. They were recruited into parties all the time; working at the Guild, Nadine had witnessed it many times.

Low stats weren’t a deal-breaker as long as you were male—no, as long as you *weren’t female*.

Every detail of this story had infuriated Tanya to the point that she had kept making comments like, “Fuck that! That’s so stupid! Let’s kick all their asses,” all the while ordering bottle after bottle of wine.

“For some reason I just... accepted it, you know? All of it. I just shrugged my shoulders,” Nadine said after a moment.

“Mmhmm,” Laplace replied softly.

Side by side, they leaned against the railing. The scattered stars twinkled like rock candy as the moon’s warm, honey-hued light shone down upon them.

“The sky’s beautiful tonight,” Nadine murmured, staring up at it. Then, after a moment, she continued, “Her wild drunkenness aside... it made me really happy that Tanya would get so... so *furious* on my behalf, you know?”

“*Oui, je sais*. That’s one of the things I like most about her.”

“Likewise. I mean, at Level 3, I’m completely useless as a Healer. You saw me—I could barely manage to get Tanya to sober up. So when she invited me to the party, I was both happy and... and scared.”

“Mmhmm.”

“But she agreed to my terms... and then she actually got Alisa into the Imperial Magic Academy, and I thought... you know, maybe she’s not the kind of person who would stab me in the back or abandon me. Tell me, is she...

someone I can trust?" Nadine's fingers tightened around the railing.

"You'll have to decide that for yourself, I'm afraid."

"In that case, I suppose I'll just have to put her to the test."

Laplace giggled. "Now then... I know that's not the only thing you wanted to ask me, correct?"

"How did you know...?" Nadine swallowed. *No point in trying to hide it now*, she thought. "Laplace, are you... are you really the Great Sorceress from the myths?"

"*Oui, c'est exact*. It's the honest truth, but whether you believe me is up to you, of course."

A passing breeze ruffled their hair. Tonight Nadine had traded her braids for a half-ponytail; she chuckled faintly as the lavender locks tickled her skin.

"Coming from you, I'm almost inclined to believe it."

"Okay then, I'll prove it."

Laplace reached over—

"Wait, what?!"

—and lifted Nadine into her arms. Then she slowly floated into the air.

"Wh... what the?! Am I *flying*?!"

"Consider this a token of my gratitude for babysitting our drunk friend—a free gift from the Great Sorceress!" With a snap of her fingers, now Nadine was levitating, too.

She floated out of Laplace's arms and skillfully regained her balance.

"*Bien joué!* You've got some good reflexes, don't you, Nadine?"

"Huh? Wha?!"

"Now then, it's time to fly! What say we race all the way to that clock tower?"

"What?! W-Wait—*Laplace, slow down!*"

The clock tower was an iconic Ode landmark—the perfect place for a midnight rendezvous, and in midair, no less.

“That was incredible,” Nadine breathed later, as they landed back on the balcony.

“Hee hee! Just don’t tell Tanya, okay?” Laplace set a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Nadine bit back a yawn. “Oh, okay... Good night, Laplace... Oh, actually...”

“Hmm?”

“The truth is, I’d heard of Tanya before we met. That’s why I felt safe asking her to help Alisa. Back in adventuring school, she was practically a legend.”

“Oho! Somehow I’m not surprised.”

“She was just some country bumpkin—no magical lineage at all. Then she showed up and trounced all the guys in her class. Whenever I asked, my teachers all said her prowess wasn’t natural-born talent; it was achieved through sheer effort. And... they’d always say...” Nadine hesitated, then leaned forward and whispered, ““What a shame someone of her aptitude was born a woman.””

“Yikes. If Tanya finds out, she’ll be quite furious.”

“Yeah... She already got angry enough on my behalf, so...” Nadine pressed her index finger to her lips. “Let’s keep this between ourselves.”

“*C’est bon, d’accord.* I’m pretty good at keeping secrets.”

“Alright. Good night for real this time.” And with that, Nadine headed back into the hotel room.

As she crawled into bed, she thought back to that amber moon painted upon the indigo skies and wondered...

What color will my future be?

3

In the week leading up to the Sparring Tournament, the three women had their work cut out for them. Liliun was a brand-new party, and as such, they

needed to get some quests under their belt. And so, over the next few days, the three of them paid frequent visits to the Adventurers' Guild, and snatched up every Rank C quest they could get their paws on.

Frankly speaking, these quests were so far beneath their level it was kind of hilarious.

"Good morning!"

Once again, they had arrived at the Guild bright and early—but this time, everyone turned to stare. Possibly they were mystified by the idea of an all-female party. Some of them murmured in surprise at the sight of Tanya's oversized sword.

"Heh heh heh... It would seem my personally handcrafted greatsword is a huge hit," Laplace smirked. Evidently she was feeling rather pleased with herself. "Maybe I should think about a career in weapon design!"

"Not to change the subject, but—"

"Hey! Don't just ignore me!"

"—what *is* a Magi-Knight, anyway?" Nadine finished.

This was perhaps a gauche question, considering a max-level Magi-Knight was literally standing right there in front of her.

Tanya chuckled. To be fair, every quest thus far had been quickly managed either by one snap of Laplace's fingers or by one simple sword spell, courtesy of Tanya herself. Hence, she hadn't had much opportunity to showcase a Magi-Knight's full capabilities. After all, she didn't need to.

"Are you, like, a Mage who can wield a sword, or a Knight who can cast magic, or what?"

Tanya grinned. "C'mon, Nadine! Isn't it obvious? A Magi-Knight is..."

With a smile, she proceeded to—

"It's... uh..."

—fumble the question.

She didn't have an answer to that. Hell, she didn't even know the answer

herself. She could still cast magic the same way she always had, except now she could use it to boost her physical agility, too. She realized she'd been thinking of herself as a Magi-Knight without really questioning what exactly that entailed.

She shot a pleading look at Laplace, who sat beside her eating a slice of chocolate cake.

"Nom nom... Mmm, this cake is great..."

"Uh, Laplace? Hello?"

"Hmm?" Laplace tilted her head inquisitively, licking the chocolate from the corner of her lips. Sexy. "Oh, that? Easy. Let's get a quest that's actually challenging for a change." Grinning, she held up both hands in double peace signs. "I'll explain it all on the battlefield!"

Another free gift from the Great Sorceress, apparently.

4

"One-two! One-two!" Laplace chanted as she walked forward, wearing the shoes Tanya had picked out for her. Yes, this pampered Sorceress was actually walking with her feet on the ground—something she had very little experience doing, since she'd spent most of her life levitating via magic. It did seem like a waste to scuff up her brand-new shoes, though.

"Uh, Laplace?"

"What is it? You know, this 'walking' thing really is tricky. I need to get more practice in."

"Can you maybe save it for later?!?!"

Tanya's voice echoed across the underground labyrinth—the most dangerous dungeon within walking distance of the capital. Before them stood ten, twenty... no, at least thirty Stone Golems that she could see. A ridiculous number, at any rate. They were all more than twice Tanya's height, and as for their weight... well, let's not gossip.

"*You're* the one who said we should take on a challenging quest, remember?! So the least you could do is pay attention!"

They had graduated from skele-warriors to golems now, and this labyrinth was cursed to spawn golems ad infinitum. Thus, the Guild regularly hired parties to go and clear it out. But something about this just didn't seem right.

"Are you *sure* this is a Rank C quest?!"

"Oh... er... I think it said something like 'Recommended Rank: B or Greater'... but obviously I just used my magic to 'fix' that..."

"You used magic to falsify the quest listing?! Oh my god... I'm going to the front lines! This will be dangerous, so both of you back up!"

With a battle cry, Tanya lunged at the nearest golem and slashed it with her sword... but though her mobility was boosted with Wind Magic, the blade didn't so much as leave a dent. Just made a measly little *plink* sound as it bounced off.

Her next idea was to go for an Exploding Slash like with the Wyvern in the Western Wasteland—*no, what am I thinking?! This is an underground labyrinth! An explosion could bring the whole place down on our heads!*

"Ooh, looks like physical attacks won't work. Perfect."

"What part of this is perfect, exactly?! Back me up here, Laplace!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that. We're supposed to be showing Nadine what's so special about Magi-Knights, remember?"

"What?"

Laplace smirked. "It's time for a private lesson with your personal tutor, the Great and Beautiful Sorceress!"

With a snap of her fingers, the golems began to change form.

"Wha—?!"

Water Golems imbued with the power of Water Magic. Clay Golems, built with a Water/Earth mud fusion. And Fire Golems that could wield the power of Fire Magic.

"Heh heh. Pretty impressive, aren't I?"

"How are you PROUD of this?! ARE YOU NUTS?!?!"

"It seems we'll only be able to defeat them with magic-based attacks," Nadine

whispered, her voice tinged with despair.

Tanya shooed her back a few more steps, then turned and held her Not-Excalibur aloft.

“G-Got it... I just need to cast a few spells...”

“*Non, non!* If we’re going to showcase a Magi-Knight’s true strength, then merely casting spells would defeat the purpose, would it not?”

“Okay, well, they’re *really* starting to close in on me here! Have you seen their faces?! They look just like statues! It’s terrifying!”

“That’s because they *are* statues! Now then, the Magi-Knight class is a cross between a Mage and a Knight. The biggest advantage to this is that you can wield mana without the time delay caused by casting or incantation. Instead, you can imbue that mana directly into your sword skills to create magical attacks! Now then, Tanya, let’s start with that Water Golem there. What magical attack would be most effective against Water Magic?”

“...Lightning Magic.”

“Bingo! Now go get him!”

‘*Go get him?*’ *That’s it?!* *Fine, whatever!* Tanya closed her eyes. “Initiate mana circulation.”

Were she allowed to use her spells, this is the point at which she’d normally start casting. Instead, she focused her mana directly into the Not-Excalibur.

Lightning Magic, engage!

With that thought, her sword began to crackle and buzz with electrical discharge.

“Let’s do this! Hyaaaahhhh!!!”

Mind you, Tanya had next to no experience with sword techniques, but nevertheless, with the help of her boosted agility, she quickly closed the gap between herself and the Water Golem. And then, with a mighty slash—she sent the creature toppling to the ground, just like that.

“That’s... that’s *amazing!* A one-hit knockout!” Nadine exclaimed.

“*Voilà!* Atta girl, Tanya! Your fighting skills are simply superb! Reminds me of the time you fired an Explosion in my direction.”

“What?! She... she cast Explosion at you?!”

“Oh, did we not tell you that story? A direct hit, I tell you. My, was I ever frightened!”

“Excuse me?! That’s not the sort of spell you should cast on another person! And for that matter, how on earth did you survive it?! *Are either of you even human?!*”

Meanwhile, as the rear guard was enjoying *that* lively conversation—

“I think I’ve got the hang of this,” Tanya murmured to herself.

Circulate the mana, focus it into the sword, engage, slash. Hell, this is actually a lot faster than casting!

“Next, the Clay Golem! I’ll use Fire Magic to dry out that mud!”

Fire Magic, engage!

“Hyah!” Before the Clay Golem could finish crumbling, Tanya had already moved on to the next. “Now the Fire Golem!”

Water Magic, engage! She swung her sword and a tsunamic wave gushed forth, extinguishing the Fire Golem’s magma.

“Wow...!” Nadine gasped, awestruck. “I can’t believe you can switch between the elements that quickly! You’re incredible, Tanya!”

“Isn’t she? All thanks to her natural mana capacity and years of magical training. It’s not a feat the average adventurer could manage... not without exceptional skill and accuracy, that is.”

“Plus, those sword skills! When did she find the time to learn all that?”

“Her what? Oh, right. That.” Laplace paused. “I think she’s just making those up as she goes along.”

“What?! But her swordsmanship... it’s on par with any trained Knight!”

“I imagine she’s just doing whatever it takes to win.”

“What?!?!?”

Then again, she was apparently the sort of person who would cast Explosion on another human being, so maybe this wasn't entirely out of character for her.

“Another one down! Now to topple that Stone Golem with Impact Magic!!!”

And as Tanya worked her way through the rest of the enemy horde, she found herself thinking—*man, this is actually really fun*. She could never switch between elements this quickly with regular spells. Plus, the power of her attacks didn't seem to have a direct inverse correlation with her accuracy, as spells typically did. *This kicks ass!*

Unable to conceal her elation, Tanya gleefully slashed through golem after golem.

“HAHAHAHAHA!!! Who's next, huh?!?! COME AND GET ME!!!”

They were on track to finish this quest in under five minutes total.

“Laplace, um...”

“What is it?”

“Is Tanya one of those... ‘demon on the battlefield’ types, by chance?”

“Welllll... I can't say for sure one way or the other, but... she's been under a lot of stress lately.”

“Stress?” Nadine stared blankly. *You want to call that display of insanity ‘stress’?! I think not! I'm pretty sure these are her true colors we're looking at!*

Meanwhile—

“BOOYAH!!!”

And with a thunderous *CRASH*, the final golem was shattered. Quest complete.

Tanya's breaths were heavy and her heart raced—not from exertion, but from excitement. *Holy shit, I can actually fight! Being a Magi-Knight rocks!*

“You know, I... I think we might actually win the tournament!” she exclaimed.

“Y-Yeah, maybe!” Nadine replied with a forced laugh.

Seriously, you're so overpowered, you're basically broken. I'm starting to think this Ryan guy won't make it out alive.

Chapter 6: Trouncing the Tournament Prelims

1

On the first day of the tournament, a group of high-born nobles arrived at the arena well before the gates opened to the public. Dressed in all their finery, they looked exceptionally out of place.

“Wow... I’ve never seen the arena before!” exclaimed a young girl in an extravagant dress. She peered down at the empty stadium from the VIP box seats, her blonde hair dancing in the breeze. This was Arianora Aweigkorrt, the Crown Princess of the Pajan Empire. At age thirteen, she was the sole direct descendant of the Emperor.

“Step back from there, Your Highness. You could fall,” warned a handsome robe-clad man, his expression stern.

“Hee hee! Oh, do relax, Sir Maxwell.”

Maxwell was the Court Grand Mage. Once a hero who had sealed the Great Sorceress to save the Empire, he had somehow acquired eternal youth and longevity in the three hundred years since. A living legend, in other words.

“Today I serve as your bodyguard, and therefore—”

“A Court Grand Mage as my bodyguard? Surely you mean to say my *babysitter*.”

“Very funny.”

As heir to the monarchical Aweigkorrt legacy, Arianora was obligated now to appear at public events such as these. Truth be told, she had no interest in groups of men throwing themselves at each other in gory combat.

Nevertheless, she held out hope that some part of this spectacle might just make the whole ordeal worthwhile...

That morning, the entire capital was teeming with excitement. Adventurers of every stripe had gathered in the plaza just outside the arena.

“The big day’s finally here,” Nadine murmured, clutching her staff tightly.

In a crowd where most of the female fighters were wearing bikini armor, Lilium’s modest dress code made them stick out like a sore thumb. Even Nadine herself had traded in her skirt for a pair of pants.

Just then, she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to find Tanya standing beside her. “Don’t worry, Nadine. You’re our Healer; we won’t let you get hurt.”

She was only Level 3, and yet Tanya called her “their” Healer without hesitation... Nadine found herself eager to prove herself worthy of the title. She nodded firmly. *You can count on me.*

To Tanya, this was reassuring to see. Over the past week, she’d tackled quest after quest to polish her skills as a Magi-Knight. She was confident she could defeat just about anyone. And now the time had come. *Time to finally get my revenge.*

“We are now opening admission to the arena!” the soldier in charge announced. “Party representatives, please form a single-file line at the reception desk!”

Cheers rose from the crowd as the line began to move. Tanya’s chest tightened. *Are Ryan and his stupid friends somewhere in this mass of people with me?*

“Allons-y! Make way for Laplace the Great Sorceress!”

“Settle down, Laplace! And lower your voice!”

“Let me know if you trip and hurt yourself, I can take care of little scrapes and stuff,” Nadine chimed in.

Business as usual for Lilium.

“Alright, ladies! Let’s go!”

The Adventurers’ Sparring Tournament was Ode’s oldest tradition, and it

attracted competitors from all across the country.

Let the games begin!

3

The Sparring Tournament was comprised of two smaller tournaments: the preliminaries, divided evenly into four “blocks,” and the finals, where the winners from each block would then be pitted against each other.

In the prelims, teams of three would compete until either the party leader surrendered or they could no longer do battle. In the finals, each team would compete in one doubles match and two singles matches, with the party leader required to compete in the second singles match.

Parties who placed first or second in the previous tournament were permitted to skip the prelims entirely; everyone else was sorted into blocks, and the battles began. Unfortunately for Liliu, Ryan’s party name was nowhere to be found—in their block, at least.

“Are you sure that sniveling coward will actually make it through the tournament?” Laplace asked, tilting her head quizzically.

It was a valid point. Should Ryan be defeated by another party in the prelims, all their efforts would have been in vain. But Tanya scoffed derisively. “Oh, he’ll be fine. The party landed second place last year, so they’re seeded. All thanks to me and that mercenary he hired.”

“Wow! He’s scum in every way possible!”

Last year, Ryan had insisted that the party needed to make a reputation for themselves... but when it came time to actually compete, he barely lifted a finger. Instead, he entered Tanya into nearly every match and had her spam all of her best offensive spells until they won.

Worse still, he’d hired a mercenary specifically to compete in his name—talk about spineless! It was an affront to all those who tried to compete on their own merits. *He’s just a lazy mooch who would rather make everyone else do all the heavy lifting! And the entire party’s full of enablers! Now he thinks he’s better than everyone!*

“Goddamn it! He’s probably hired another mercenary this year too! Rrgh... Just you wait, asshole... We just gotta make it to the party leader match...!”

“And that’s where you’ll beat him black and blue, *non?*”

“*OUI, OUI!!!*”

If anything, Ryan’s seeded status was a boon that ensured he would be waiting for them in the finals. But to get there, first they needed to win the prelims.

Round one... was a piece of cake.

Commentary from Liliu, the winning team:

T: “Gosh, what can I say? That match went by a lot faster than I was expecting!”

N: “Agreed. I was surprised our opponents put all their stats into Charm.”

L: “Heh heh heh! Clearly they need a real goddess like yours truly to show them the true meaning of seduction—”

T: “Thank you, Laplace, that’s enough.”

Commentary from the losing team:

“Man, fuck this! After all the trouble I went through to hire a high-level Shaman chick who could use Charm... We were gonna defang all the meathead guys and ensure ourselves an easy victory, damn it! How were we supposed to know we’d be up against three women and *zero* men?! Who *does* that?!”

Losers, indeed.

This greasy middle-aged man was supposed to be the backbone of his party, but after Liliu knocked him around like a piñata, he was reduced to little more than sour grapes. He was such a pushover they didn’t even need to use magic.

Next!

Round two... was also a piece of cake.

Commentary from Liliu, the winning team:

N: “Well, we were up against two female Healers and one male Knight. I

assume their strategy was to have the rear guard spam heals and buffs on the main attacker. However...”

T: “Laplace, I can’t believe you took advantage of the Healers’ skimpy clothes like that! I’m starting to think maybe you *are* evil after all!”

L: “*Non, non!* I was just being efficient! If anything, it’s *their* fault for walking around with their midriiffs exposed! Besides, I wanted to take the spotlight for a change!”

N: “Hahaha... No, I don’t think it was their fault. You have to remember, immodest equipment is the norm for women in our society... that, and I really doubt they were expecting you to make it start snowing. Oh, and it’s a good thing that Knight wasn’t all that strong once his buffs were gone. Right, everyone?”

T: “Right you are, Nadine. But just for the record, Laplace, it’s okay if you’re secretly a Villainous Witch or something. I’ll still like you.”

L: “Villainous Witch?! How rude! I already have an alternate title, and it’s much more impressive than that, thank you very much!”

T: “...You mean the Wicked Dragonwhore?”

L: “No, not *that* one!”

N: “Hahaha... Let’s keep it down, ladies. We entered Laplace under a pseudonym, remember?”

T: “Oh, right! God, that stupid alias! Only Laplace would try to enter a tournament under the name ‘Stone Cold Stunner’!”

L: “Don’t judge me! Besides, you know what they say: always judge a book by its cover!”

T: “No, they don’t! I swear, you’re so obsessed with yourself!”

N: “Guys! Seriously! No fighting!”

...You can imagine the rest.

Commentary from the losing team:

“Man, fuck this! After all the trouble I went through to hire high-level Healers

who could cast heals and debuffs... With their help, I was gonna take all the glory for myself, damn it! How were we supposed to know the temperature in the arena would suddenly plummet to sub-zero and make the girls sick?! They ran off to the bathroom and took forever getting back because it was ‘crowded’ or whatever! And for that matter, why the hell were those other chicks wearing all that armor?! Tits or GTFO!”

Losers, indeed.

This arrogant young man was supposed to be the backbone of his party, but after Tanya used Wind Magic to boost her speed for a lightning-fast punch, he promptly passed out. He was such a pushover she didn’t even need to use her sword.

Next!

4

The arena lobby was abuzz with conversation. The topic: Lilium.

“Tanya’s so badass! She really ought to have some sort of cool title, like ‘Knight of the Pink Petals’ or something! Am I right?”

“Personally, I’m on Team Stone Cold Stunner! She’s so elegant and aloof, like, *ermahgerd!*”

“Uh... what’s ‘ermahgerd’?”

“...N-Never mind.”

“You know why I like Nadine? She doesn’t ever take the spotlight, but she can still dodge any attack that comes her way. Plus, she’s just such a cinnamon roll, you know?”

“I know, right?!”

“Totally!”

Women of all ages, young spectators and fully grown adventurers alike, were gushing and swooning like crazy. In contrast, the men all scowled like sore losers. They’d hoped to show off during this tournament so they could get laid,

and now Lilium had summarily crushed their dreams.

“You know,” said Female Adventurer A, “I like how humble they are; they don’t gloat despite all their victories.”

Female Adventurer B nodded. “Yeah, and you know what else? I heard they split their quest rewards evenly between the three of them! That way the Healer gets a fair share!”

“Lucky!” sighed Female Adventurer C. “In any other party, us Healers typically get screwed.”

“I really like their equipment, too! It’s so gallant and badass! And it doesn’t seem to impact their fighting ability at all, either... Makes me feel kinda stupid for always dressing so lightly.”

“I know, right? They’re so stylish!”

“I actually passed by Tanya in the hallway a little while ago. She smells like flowers!”

“Ugh... When it comes to the rest of these dudes, we’re lucky if they take a bath once every three days...”

“Ugh! Right?!”

“I wanna join their party so bad!”

And so, in winning the favor of every woman in the arena, Lilium had started to draw attention to itself. Whenever they walked out to compete, the ladies all cheered—and consequently, the men all grumbled and slumped their shoulders.

Nevertheless, Lilium kept winning match after match... until they reached the championship round of the finals tournament. Their opponent: Ryan’s party. And everyone in the audience was on the edge of their seat.

5

“This is it... The championship round... Good thing we get a few minutes to rest beforehand,” Nadine sighed as break time rolled around.

“Seriously.” Tanya let out a self-deprecating laugh. All the nonstop sparring had taken its toll.

The arena cafe was almost entirely empty, possibly because none of the other parties felt comfortable “taking it easy” during a nationwide tournament. *Relax, tryhards.*

It did feel a bit strange, though, having a strategy meeting over tea and cake. Certainly Tanya’s old party would never have allowed it.

“Nom nom nom... Ish sho good...!” Laplace moaned through a mouthful of her third slice.

Meanwhile, Nadine was demolishing a plate of herb-roasted chicken. Evidently she wasn’t much of a dessert person.

“Mmm... This is delicious... When I worked at the Guild, everyone just assumed I liked sweets, so they’d always give me these little boxes of chocolates. It was awful,” she explained.

“Oh, yeah, I bet that was awkward. You felt obligated to accept them, right?”

“Yes, exactly. They were only trying to be nice, after all. I just wish they would’ve thought to ask me if I even liked chocolate.”

Just then, their peaceful moment was interrupted.

“Hey ladiesh, it looksh like we have a vishitor.”

“Laplace! Don’t talk with your mouth full!”

They looked over at the cafe entrance to find a man standing there. Judging from his equipment, he was an Archer.

“You ladies are with Liliium, right?”

Every other party on the tournament roster had an intimidating name, like “Titans” or “Dragons” or “Giants” or “Lions,” so a flowery name like “Liliium” stuck out.

“Yeah, that’s us.”

“What of it?”

“I want to join.”

Evidently this adventurer was impressed with their performance. This was one of the perks of competing in the Sparring Tournament; if your party did well, it made recruiting new members that much easier.

At first blush, this Archer guy was a good-looking fellow who seemed to care about his appearance. As such, their initial impression of him was positive.

“Oh wow, another one? We’ve been getting a lot of tentative recruits today,” Nadine mused.

“*Oui, oui.* We’re the stars of the show, after all,” Laplace replied.

“I don’t know about that... We’re at least second place, though. That’s pretty impressive.”

All thanks to the Level 100 Magi-Knight and Level 100 Sorceress. Ordinarily they’d never be allowed to compete, but with the addition of one Level 3 Healer, their party average sank to Rank C, enabling them to wipe the floor with a bunch of small-time adventurers who really didn’t stand a chance.

Every single match was a cakewalk, and now the entire stadium audience (men and women alike) couldn’t stop talking about the “rookie party” who’d battled their way to the tournament championship. Hence, this was certainly not the first prospective recruit they’d encountered today; as a matter of fact, this Archer was their twelfth.

However—

“Sooo...” The man glanced around the cafe.

“What is it?”

“Well, I’m told Lilium’s party leader is a super-rare Magi-Knight or something...”

“Yeah...?”

Then he, totally oblivious, turned to Tanya and asked, “So where is he?”

A vein bulged on her forehead and she gritted her teeth. “I’m right here.”

“What?”

“It’s me, okay?! I’m the party leader! And you’re disqualified!!!”

“Wha—?!” Shot down, just like that.

“Are you blind? There’s exactly one person here carrying a *giant sword*, and you wanna ask me where the leader is? I know I haven’t had much of a chance to show it off since everyone here is total weaksauce, but seriously, *do you not have fucking eyes?! Moron!*” Tanya spat as the Archer beat a hasty retreat. She was *obviously* the only Magi-Knight. How could he have looked directly at her sword and *still* asked her that stupid question? Scowling, she stuffed a big bite of cake into her mouth. “Guess he never stopped to consider that the party leader might be female!”

“Now, now. Just think of it as an easy excuse to say no,” Nadine offered, smiling stiffly.

Indeed, with two party members at Level 100, they couldn’t afford to take on any new recruits or else they’d be promoted out of Rank C. Nevertheless, some of these dudebro adventurers had refused to take no for an answer; as soon as they realized the entire party was female, a lot of them suddenly took on a condescending tone and made comments like, “I’ll bet you ladies are having a tough time without any men around. I don’t mind joining your party if you want.”

“What is it about being male that automatically gives them unshakable confidence? Where does it come from? Their c—?”

“*Ne le dis pas!* Let’s not get raunchy!”

“What? I was going to say *cake*, obviously! What gutter is your mind in?”

“Oh, cake. Alright then. Actually, Tanya, can I order another slice?”

“Haven’t you already had, like, *ten*?! You better be paying for all this!”

And so their break time came to an end... and the championship round was upon them.

Chapter 7: The Championship Round Begins

1

Slowly but surely, Lilium had fought their way to the finals tournament, Ryan's party awaiting them on the other side. Now the championship round was nearly upon them.

In their assigned waiting room, the girls enjoyed some tea and snacks as they discussed strategy. Every minute felt like an eternity.

Laplace had wandered off to explore the arena, claiming she was "bored of waiting." Lately she'd (mostly) gotten the hang of walking like a normal person, so the others felt comfortable letting her go off on her own. Her progress was kind of touching, in a way.

"Alright, we've got Ryan's team right where we want them. Now it's time to give them what for!" Nadine exclaimed brightly.

Thinking back to their previous battles, a certain observation crossed Tanya's mind. "You know, Nadine, for Level 3, you're pretty impressive."

"Huh? I-Impressive how?" Nadine asked, her lavender braids swaying as she tilted her head quizzically.

As far as they'd been told, this Level 3 Healer had next to no combat training. If it wasn't for Tanya, she would still be working the reception desk at the Adventurers' Guild.

"I mean, you were dodging spells and arrows left and right!"

"O-Oh... uhh... was I?" Nadine laughed nervously.

"You were! I mean, obviously I was doing my best to deflect anything that came at you, but in those group matches, I knew some attacks were inevitably going to slip through the cracks one way or the other... and yet you avoided them all with the grace of a dancer! I don't know if I should be confused or relieved!"

“...I...”

“Don’t worry, I’m still going to defend you either way. It just got me thinking, like, *wow, it almost feels like she’s a pro—*”

“Stop!”

Tanya shrank back in surprise.

“Sorry, uh... You’re just really overthinking it,” Nadine stammered, her smile stiff. “Anyway, um... sorry for shouting at you. I know a Level 3 Healer has no right to talk back to her party leader...”

“No, no. If anything, I should apologize. I clearly made you uncomfortable,” Tanya replied as she tucked a strand of pale pink hair behind her ear. She could tell from the look on Nadine’s face that it would be unwise to continue this line of conversation. Instead, she took a big sip of tea sweetened with flower nectar. *Mmmm.*

“Is that Tanya? It is! Hey!”

“Ugh! Ryan!”

Sure enough, who should walk up but Ryan himself. *Out of shape and balding prematurely? That’s him, alright.*

“What do you want? A knuckle sandwich?”

“You know we’re not allowed to fight outside the stadium. Anyway, I just came to give you guys a heads-up, since I’m a nice guy.”

“What is it?”

“As with last year, we’ve hired some outside assistance. He’s gonna wreck you, Tanya. You don’t stand a chance against a man’s raw strength.”

“Gross! You’re not even embarrassed about phoning it in!”

Strength is unisex, jackass! Not that I expect YOU to understand that, Tanya thought bitterly.

All the while, Nadine fidgeted quietly, and it was obvious she had something to say. Then, finally, she spoke. “Excuse me,” she called in the direction of Ryan’s Mage girlfriend(?), Katherine, who’d shown up with him.

“Hmm? What’s up?”

Like the majority of the other female combatants, her outfit was rather skimpy. And now that Tanya had grown accustomed to fighting in actual, functional armor, she found herself feeling a bit sorry for the woman. *Aren’t you cold in that?*

“You’re... Katherine, right?”

“Hmm? Yeah, that’s my name.”

“I, um... actually went to adventuring school with you. Not in the same class or anything, since I was taking Healer classes, but...”

“What are you, my stalker? Creepy! I don’t know you at all!” Katherine whimpered in a syrupy voice, clinging to Ryan.

Just then, a deep, intimidating, yet oddly peculiar voice called out: “Uh, hellooo? Leaderrr? How long are you going to stand around chattinggg?”

There stood a large, dignified man dressed in robes, a smug smirk plastered on his craggy face.

“Oh, hi there, Master!” Ryan exclaimed in a toadying voice.

“Yes, *hellooo*, my dear Leaderrr. I’ve been looking for youuu.”

Nadine took one look at this robed man and gasped. “That’s...!”

“Whoa, what?! Nadine, you know that guy?!”

“Everyone knows him—he’s famous! Haven’t you heard of Goliath the Master Mercenary? As a Mage, he’s *undefeated*, or so they say. But he never commits to one particular party, so no one’s been able to measure his exact stats... If I had to guess, though, I’d say he’s at least Level 90!”

“*Ninety*?! Then how did he get into the Sparring Tournament? It’s supposed to be off-limits to any party with an average above 70... and Ryan’s party isn’t *that* underleveled!”

As far as Tanya knew, Ryan’s party level was *juuust* high enough to make the Rank C cutoff.

“Well, the thing is... Because Goliath refuses to let the Guild measure him,

they only have outdated records from when he first registered... and on file, he's only Level 40."

"That's it?!"

"Keep in mind, one's level measurement isn't the be-all, end-all. Two adventurers at the exact same level can have vastly different combat abilities based on the amount of fighting experience they've acquired. And Goliath, well... he's fought a lot."

"He sounds... formidable."

Nadine nodded nervously.

"Hah!" Ryan scoffed. "Master Goliath is formidable, alright. Don't forget, he's the Master Mercenary! The perfect pawn to use against your all-girl slumber party."

"Oh, Ryan, you're so smart! I knew we could count on you!" Katherine fawned. Considering she was picking at a hangnail as she said it, this praise couldn't have sounded more transparently fake if she'd tried.

"Alright, forget about these chicks! Let's go, Master!"

"Hoohoo! I'm not gonna lose to these little ladiesss, that's for suuure!"

"You better not, okay? Because I do NOT want to have to fight, got it?!"

Kissing ass: the one skill Ryan had bothered to polish.

"Oh, and one last thinggg!" Goliath turned back to Lilium and sneered.

"Maybe you should try wearing women's clothes for a chaaange. Show us some tits and ass, or else everyone will think you're a maaan!"

Tanya swallowed hard.

You might be a Master Mercenary, and your level's a total mystery... but I'm gonna wipe that nasty smirk right off your face.

2

"I'm counting on you, Master Goliath! I *really* don't want to fight them!" Ryan whined at the top of his lungs.

They were surrounded by all the losing parties, and everyone in his vicinity was giving him a dirty look, but he didn't notice. Not very smart, this one.

"I don't know. Those ladies seemed rather powerful."

"What?!"

"Especially that Tanya woman. I got the sense she's several levels of magnitude stronger than you led me to believe." Goliath's playful mood had evaporated; that creepy persona was just a façade, after all. "I'm warning you now... there's a chance—a small chance—that you may end up having to fight."

"Wh... Excuse me?! Have you forgotten how much I'm paying you?!"

"Look, I'm just trying to run a business. If you don't like it, I can refund you right now."

"Rrgh..." But Ryan couldn't bear to swallow his pride. Ambition was the one thing he had going for him.

"Here. Don't worry, I'll only charge an additional ten thousand seculs."

"Huh?"

Goliath handed him a tiny scrap of paper.

"What's this?"

"A trump card." Goliath smirked. "You don't want to let those little girls humiliate you, do you? Then hit 'em with that.

Trust me, they'll never see it coming."

3

At the start of the championship round, the two parties stood facing one another.

Tanya glared at Ryan. "Ready to get your ass kicked?"

"Hah! You won't even make it to the leader battle; my party members are gonna trounce you. I've got a lot of money riding on this, so we kinda can't afford to lose. But hey, you should be happy with second place, considering you

got this far without any guys!”

“Oh yeah? Talk big all you want, because you’re going down,” Tanya spat.

All eyes were on the pink-haired Knight, and the crowd was going nuts.

■SCHEDULE■

—Doubles—

Goliath the Master Mercenary

Katherine Foxxi

VERSUS

Stone Cold Stunner (Alias)

Nadine Amaryllis

—Singles—

Goliath the Master Mercenary

VERSUS

Stone Cold Stunner (Alias)

—Leader Battle—

Ryan Daars

VERSUS

Tanya Artemiciov

On her way to the doubles match, Laplace (or Stone Cold Stunner, the world’s most arrogant pseudonym) was in high spirits.

“If we win the doubles match, I’ll forfeit the singles match. But if we lose the doubles match, then I’ll win the singles match!” she reminded everyone in her usual singsong voice.

“You seem confident, Laplace.”

“Heh heh! But of course. I’m the Great Sorceress, after all,” Laplace smirked.

Looking at her now, Tanya found herself impressed. Just a few short hours ago, she never would’ve dreamed of this.

4

A few short hours ago...

“Laplace?” Tanya called, reaching out to cup the woman’s cheek. She was oddly distant.

“...Oh, sorry. I guess even a Great Sorceress can’t always keep her cool, hmm?” Laplace laughed. “I just... I never imagined Maxwell was still alive.”

Moments ago, during the intermission between matches, the arena had erupted into cheers and fanfare as the tournament organizers introduced the VIP guests: the Crown Princess Arianora and Maxwell the Court Grand Mage.

The instant Laplace heard the name Maxwell, she’d lunged at Tanya and clung to her for dear life. “How can this be happening?!” she shouted.

Maxwell was Laplace’s mortal enemy. According to legend, Laplace had hatched a wicked plot to destroy the capital, and thus Maxwell had sealed her away. It was but one of his many great and heroic deeds.

Normally Nadine was the one who smoothed things over, but she had stepped away.

“I’m sorry, Laplace... I just assumed you knew he was immortal...”

“Hah... *Immortal*...” Laplace bit her lip. “In my day, Maxwell hadn’t achieved immortality. That was—”

“You, right?” After all, this 300-year-old Sorceress didn’t look a day over 25.

“Right,” Laplace nodded. “Loath as I am to admit it, I’m immortal. One of the many great discoveries made in the golden age of sorcery 300 years ago.”

She had spent the past 300 years alone in the Western Wasteland, trapped in a body that would never decay. It must have been a miserable existence... The

thought made Tanya shudder.

“And now Maxwell’s here...”

She could only imagine how humiliated Laplace must’ve felt in that moment.

“Do you want to... get a little revenge of your own?” Tanya asked.

A moment of silence passed, and then Laplace gave a self-deprecating laugh.

“No... I brought this on myself. If I didn’t want it to turn out this way, I should’ve stood up for myself back then. But instead of getting angry, I just shrugged my shoulders and accepted it... and that means it’s partially my fault.” The look on her face was something Tanya didn’t recognize. “Anyway, you won that duel in the wasteland, which means your revenge takes top priority. Besides, the bad blood between myself and Maxwell is old news. Now then, we should focus on the tour—whoa!”

She yelped as Tanya, the shorter of the two, pulled her into a hug. Instantly, her face flushed pink.

“Er... Tanya?”

“Just let me have this for a minute.”

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden? Wh... What if Nadine comes back and finds us like this?”

But Tanya only tightened her grip.

“I...” she began faintly, “I can’t begin to imagine all the suffering and misery you’ve endured. But...”

Laplace is a good person. She didn’t deserve to be isolated for 300 years. She must’ve been so lonely and bitter and hurt...

“...Please don’t blame yourself for what happened to you,” she finished, her voice shaking.

Laplace gently hugged her back. *Oh, Tanya. I’ve loved you ever since I found you fuming in the wasteland.*

“I’m flattered that you would empathize with me... that you would rage and mourn on my behalf.”

And as she ran her fingers through Tanya's pale pink hair, she prayed: *Dear, sweet Tanya... May your righteous anger triumph.*

"I'm looking forward to this championship match. You'd better crush this Ryan fellow, understood?"

"Like a pancake."

And so the peaceful moment passed.

5

...Which brings us to the present.

"Alright, folks! This is it—the climax of this year's Sparring Tournament!"

The announcer's voice blared over the din of the crowd.

"This is our big moment," Tanya told the others, who nodded in return. They could feel the pressure.

"*Très bien!* Just leave it to the Great Sorceress!" said Laplace.

"I... I'll do everything I can!" Nadine chimed in.

First up: the doubles match.

"...Hmm?" Sensing someone's gaze, Laplace turned—and spotted Goliath the Master Mercenary, the supposedly unbeatable Level 90 Mage, staring at her. *Oho, I get it... Let me guess: he's captivated by my "stone cold stunning" good looks!*

Just then—

"Oh hey, it's *you*," called a shrill, high-pitched voice. It was Katherine Foxxi, Ryan's girlfriend(?) with thick blonde hair, hourglass curves, and a pair of fox ears atop her head. Like Goliath, she was a Mage as well—and if he'd entered her into the tournament, then she was assuredly a strong one.

"Um... Katherine...!" Nadine called back in a tiny voice.

Katherine turned and looked at her. A moment later, her face lit up with recognition. "Oh! Oh my god, I *just* remembered you! You're Nadine the

dropout, aren't you?! What are you doing here? I heard you were working at the Guild!" she sneered.

"Nadine is our Healer," Laplace replied.

"Pffff! What, you couldn't find anyone better? Ohhh my *god*, Nadine, I *told* you to go find yourself a man and settle down! You think you can be an adventurer at Level 3?! Why don't you run along home before you hurt yourself? I'll hook you up with one of the guys in our party, so ditch the dowdy braids and glasses, mmkay? Kyahaha!" Katherine cackled. "God, what a riot!"

As Nadine stared down at the ground, Laplace walked up and clapped her on the back.

"Let's destroy them."

At this, Nadine looked up. "R-Right!"

Championship Match, Round 1:

—Doubles—

Goliath the Master Mercenary

Katherine Foxxi

VERSUS

Stone Cold Stunner (Alias)

Nadine Amaryllis

And so the gong sounded, signaling the start of the battle between a powerful Mage and the world's weakest Healer.

Chapter 8: Nadine Amaryllis, Second to None

1

Round one of the championship match had begun, and amid the thunderous applause, Nadine Amaryllis mourned. Mourned the sins she had committed. Mourned the punishment she had received.

As an entire arena's worth of cheers rained down upon her, she thought to herself: *I was never meant to stand in the spotlight like this.*

Nadine Amaryllis wasn't even her real name. She had long since forsaken the name her parents had given her, though by now there was no one left alive who would recognize it.

She was born to a family of Assassins that carried out the Imperial Court's dark bidding. Concealed in the shadows of the nation's history, their bloodstained legacy spanned many generations. Nadine herself was only a girl of twelve when she first joined their ranks. Children had their uses, after all.

She didn't question it. She didn't—*couldn't*—feel fear. Fear would only impair her ability to work.

The day she was born, her father was disappointed. As she recalled, her mother once let slip that the first thing out of his mouth had been, "I was expecting a son."

Her family was strictly patriarchal, and the expectation was that only a son could inherit their legacy. But giving birth to Nadine had taken its toll on her mother, and she was told she could no longer bear children. And once Nadine had reached an age where she could comprehend the implications of that, she desperately threw herself into her training, absorbing everything her father taught her about the craft.

She forbade herself to speak or dress like a lady. Instead, she focused on combat training, toxicology, and assassination techniques. These were the skills

she needed to survive as a child Assassin. And Nadine was gifted.

One day, she overheard her father say, “She’s doing quite well for a girl.” Oh, how her heart danced. *For a girl!* She was sure her macho, manly father had finally accepted her as his heir, despite her gender.

But this was a delusion all her own.

One night, when Nadine was seventeen, her father came home with an unfamiliar young man—the sixth son of a different Assassin family, apparently. Her father told her that this stranger would be the new heir of the family. She was to marry him, teach him everything she knew, and ultimately “go back to being a woman,” in his words.

Three months later, as the wedding approached, Nadine was on her way home from a spontaneous imperial job request in a distant part of the country. And when she arrived, all that remained of the family mansion was cold, ashen ground.

A different Assassin family had broken through their tight security. Her father, mother, and all their servants were dead, and her father’s chosen heir was the one who had arranged it all.

If only she had been born male, that traitor never would have set foot in their house.

She had done everything she could to try and live up to her father’s expectations, all to atone for the “crime” of being born female. She got her hands dirty from a tender age, just like her ancestors before her. Everything she did, she did for her father. For her family. So they would respect her. And yet, just like that, their entire legacy had been snuffed out.

She had assumed the Court would silence her, too, seeing as she’d been involved in a handful of secret schemes and killings, but instead they told her to “find a new life” and threw her out.

Why didn’t they kill me? Nadine wondered. Am I not worth the effort? Just because I’m a woman? Why? I inherited my family’s craft, didn’t I? Didn’t I?!

After that, she could only laugh at herself. She was alone, and all she had left to her name was a pair of tainted hands.

Eventually, it occurred to her that perhaps she could support herself as an adventurer instead. With that thought, she enrolled in adventuring school. Sick of hurting people, she elected to pursue the Healer class.

But she was hilariously unsuited for the role of a Healer.

In the end, she felt only despair. She couldn't heal anyone's wounds, and though she'd spent her entire life learning how to kill and deceive, she'd failed to see through the sinister plot that destroyed her entire family. She was worthless no matter what she did.

No party wanted a Level 3 Healer, so she took the job as a Guild receptionist and lived a quiet life. She wore her long hair in two braids and slapped on a pair of nerdy glasses. Polite, amiable, feminine; acting was always one of her talents. It was part of an Assassin's toolkit, after all. No one noticed.

Nothing could have prepared her, however, for the day an assassinated couple's oldest daughter walked in, looking for a Mage to take her in as a disciple. Nadine didn't have much of a salary, but she decided to support this girl and her siblings nonetheless. Not that it would make up for her crimes, of course.

She planned to waste the rest of her life here.

But then that woman showed up—Tanya.

You should join our party!

Sometimes she laughed without a care in the world. Other times she raged or wept on Nadine's behalf.

Then there was Laplace.

Nadine is our Healer, she'd declared without a moment's hesitation. Nadine had envied that self-confidence.

Hee hee! Just don't tell Tanya, okay?

Dancing through the night sky with a mischievous grin on her face, Laplace was the picture of beauty.

These women had taught her what unconditional love felt like... and now she was conflicted.

If she went back to being an Assassin, she could be more useful to Tanya. She had the tools, passed down from her father, and she had the training. But... once she dropped her soft, sweet Healer façade, would Tanya still accept her?

For once in her life, Nadine Amaryllis was scared.

She opened her eyes and looked up. Cheers and applause filled the dusty arena. Her comrade, Laplace, was standing by her side. Right now, they were in the spotlight.

“...Laplace?”

“Hmm? What is it, Nadine?”

“I’m going to go all-out in this fight, so... um...”

“Yes?”

“...Let’s be sure to win this.” *For Tanya, the woman with a heart of gold who rages on our behalf.*

“*Très bien!*”

And so the former Assassin and the Great Sorceress exchanged a secretive smile to raucous applause.

2

Championship match, round one: doubles. Win condition: the opposing team surrenders, or at least one person on the opposing team is defeated. Not only were they expected to fight as a team, but they would need to defend each other, too.

“Hon’yaaaah concharaaaah oomtaraaaah sowakaaaah! Hwa-taaaah!”

“Wh—? Uh, Laplace? I don’t know what you’re doing, but... you’re kind of freaking me out!” Nadine snapped. The championship match of a sparring tournament was no time to be speaking in tongues or whatever. *And just when I was starting to respect you!*

“Hmm? Oh, I’m pretending to recite an incantation. See, Tanya told me I can’t just snap my fingers or else I’ll draw suspicion.”

“Oh... Right, well, with all due respect, that chanting was several magnitudes more baffling than a mere snap, Laplace—”

“*Non, non!* Don’t call me that. Call me Stone Cold Stunner! Anyway... I have a feeling that creepy Goliath man is going to give us a real run for our money!”

As she spoke, Laplace jumped up... and began to levitate. All at once, the crowd went wild:

“What is she doing?! Is that... *levitation magic*?!”

“How can she do that without a magic circle?! Impossible!”

“Holy crap! She’s gotta be a master caster!”

She rose about two meters off the ground, her eyes fixed on Goliath.

“Now then, time for a little test run!”

ZOOM. She shot forward, closing the gap between her and her quarry. She was incapable of using attack magic... so what was she planning?

She quietly snapped her fingers, and instantly the sand covering the arena floor began to gravitate towards her as though it had a will of its own. It came together in her hands, compacting until it formed a weapon reminiscent of a whip—springy and supple, yet sharp enough to cut through metal. Then she swung it full force at Goliath.

Unfortunately...

“Hnn!” With one wave of his staff, Goliath deflected it easily.

“Wow! I guess you watered-down modern Mages can still handle close-range combat!”

“Pfffhee! Fighting is my job, you knooooow... Besides, nobody said we’re not allowed to be good at booooth.”

Surely no ordinary strike could have deflected Laplace’s sand whip.

“*Oui, oui!* Oh, this is interesting! Were you concentrating your mana into your staff? You may not be as gifted as Tanya, but still, not bad!”

In other words, he must have conjured up a spell strong enough to withstand the attack—and quickly, too. That would have taken a great deal of skill.

The next instant, Goliath rushed forward at lightning speed.

“Take this! The Master Mercenary’s ultimate attack: **Gravity Bullet!**”

“...Huh?”

Gravity Bullet was a spell used to punch through castle walls or heavy armored units. And a split-second later, Laplace hurtled through the air at the speed of light and slammed into the wall behind her with a deafening *POW*.

Dust and debris flew in all directions, and a belated moment later, someone in the crowd let out a shriek. Everyone was sure the match was over.

But then Laplace’s gleeful laughter echoed across the arena.

“Pfff... Haha... Hahahaha!!! Incredible! *Mon dieu, c’est fantastique!*”

She wasn’t even disheveled, much less injured. Why? Because she was wearing a force field designed to shield an entire building. Nadine let out a huge sigh of relief.

Evidently this man wasn’t called the Master Mercenary for nothing. His spellcasting prowess was formidable, and if one were to estimate his mana capacity—

“On par with Tanya or possibly above,” Laplace grinned. “*Très bien!* Nadine, leave this guy to the ol’ Stone Cold Stunner! This Great Sorceress is going all-out!”

“Pffheehee! I took this gig assuming I’d be making paste out of some chumps, buuuut... it seems you’re more than just a nice rack after all, aren’t youuuu? Gahaha! Finally, a real challeeeenge! Hee hee... pffgyaha! Now I’m getting into it!!!”

“Wow, you’re actually really creepy! Though I’ll admit, I do have a bangin’ body!”

Their banter continued as they traded blow after blow after blow. The spectacle was practically inhuman. And after a while Nadine thought to herself:

Save your weird flirting for the singles round, I’m begging you.

“...Looks like I’ll have to handle Katherine myself,” Nadine mused under her breath.

Honestly speaking, Goliath was more powerful than she’d ever imagined. But Nadine wasn’t so reckless as to throw herself into the middle of that fight. Not when Laplace—er, “Stone Cold Stunner”—was tossing out superhuman attacks left and right.

She shifted her gaze to Katherine, who was presently sneering in her direction, a safe distance away from the other two.

“I have to say, I’m surprised to see you here,” Nadine commented after a moment.

“Right back at you. Me, I just figured I might reel in a big catch if I manage to win this thing.”

“A ‘big catch’?”

“A *man*,” Katherine spat. “If I can show off, maybe a hot guy will take notice. Get me?”

“Wait... what about Ryan?”

“Hah!” Katherine narrowed one eye in contempt, her pointy fox ears twitching. “That spineless loser? *NOT IN A MILLION YEARS! HE’S A JOKE!*”

“That bad, huh?”

Nadine had started to feel sorry for her. Then again, she’d only been in that party a short time; in comparison, Tanya deserved a medal for tolerating him for all those years.

CRASH!

Meanwhile, Goliath and Laplace continued to duke it out all over the arena. But despite their flashy full-power attacks, there was nary a stray bullet, suggesting they were both completely focused on the target in front of them. The prospect was frightening.

“Pretty clever, though, am I right?”

“What’s clever?”

“Putting in time as an adventurer, getting married, having kids. That’s the mark of success, you know?” Katherine declared smugly.

For Nadine, the sight brought back distant memories of her father.

“No... I think there’s more to life than that.”

“Let me guess: you’re just jealous because men don’t like you, right? Well, fortunately for me” —Katherine held her staff at the ready— “I’m pretty good at my job, too!”

That was when she began to cast.

“Round and round the wheel turns! Hellfire, I summon thee!”

As the energy from her mana circuits made Katherine’s thick blonde hair begin to flutter, Nadine knew she was in trouble.

“Heed my call—AND GIVE CHASE!”

Is that incantation... Fireball...? I’ve never heard that opening stanza before!

“Heh heh... I fused a basic Fireball spell with my clan’s Foxfire magic!”

There was a rumble as more than a hundred bright blue fireballs manifested in the air around her.

“Uh-oh.”

4

“Holy crap, what *is* that?!” Tanya murmured to herself as she sat on the bench. This curious feat had tickled her Mage senses awake. “Low skill, low accuracy... but how can she possibly summon all those Fireballs at once?!”

She flipped through a mental checklist of every spell she knew, but couldn’t find anything remotely close. *Seriously, what am I looking at here?* She’d assumed Katherine was only posing as a Mage for show... but apparently this fox chick was more talented than she thought!

“Wait... Fox...” She thought back to Katherine’s incantation, and it hit her:

what if she'd fused an ordinary spell with beastkin magic? "Of *course*! Then she could switch over to a more natural method of mana control and convert her excess mana consumption and skill lag into additional attacks, right?! That's incredible! My mind is blown!!!"

Katherine Foxxi wasn't really a bimbo. It was just a cover for her brilliance!

"So *that's* her secret! *Now I get it!* Well played, girl!" Tanya exclaimed to herself quietly. She was well and truly geeking out over this discovery, and frankly, it was a little much.

She paused for a moment, then continued in a small voice, "Man... If only we'd met some other way, maybe we could've been friends."

5

Meanwhile, a hundred blue Fireballs descended upon the Level 3 Healer, burning her to a crisp.

No, wait... scratch that last part.

"Whoa! That's amazing! Who *is* she?!"

"I've never seen a Healer with moves like that!"

The crowd went wild as Nadine wove her way between globs of blue fire like a dancer on stage. She was so skillful, it appeared as though the Fireballs were avoiding her on purpose.

"Dude, she's on par with a Thief or something... No, maybe a Brawler!"

"But she's pretending to be a Healer? What a scam!"

"No, wait... Oh my god, you guys, I don't think that's a class skill! I think she's just dodging them!"

"WHAT?!"

"You mean she just... *knows* how to do that?!"

"Everyone in this match is completely inhuman!"

As she danced, Nadine planned her next strategy. She was equipped with her

Healer's staff, two combat knives hidden up her pant legs, and an oversized dagger on her back. This was only possible, of course, because she was going against conventional "wisdom" and had dressed modestly. All thanks to Lilium's equipment policy, instated by none other than Laplace herself.

"Rrgh! Why can't I hit you?!" Katherine growled in frustration.

One hundred Fireballs, and not a single one hit its target. Worse still, Nadine had been steadily working her way closer and closer. And Mages were generally not equipped for close combat.

She started to panic.

"Round and round the wheel turns—"

And that was the moment Nadine closed in. The crowd gasped.

"She's so fast!"

Flinging down her Healer's staff, she brought her center of gravity low to the ground and shot forward like a bullet. Meanwhile, she pulled out one of her concealed combat knives.

She still wore her dowdy braids and big, round glasses... but now the gentle look in her eyes was gone, replaced by the unfeeling darkness of an Assassin.

Her knife glinting, she growled: "Think you can keep up with my dark blade?"

"Eeeek!"

Her murderous aura froze Katherine in her tracks. But just then—

"Neeheehee! We can't afford to lose this match, little ladyyyy!"

—Goliath swooped in at the last moment to stand between her and Katherine. Nadine clucked her tongue in frustration. He was an unknown quantity; engaging with him would be too risky. Instead, she made a split-second decision. The majority of her assassination techniques were surprise attacks... and when it came to pure combat skill, she was confident she could take him...

"*Hé hé*, Nadine!"

A split-second later, she heard a *snap*. Reflexively, she looked over to find

Laplace grinning back at her.

“What say we take another trip to the clock tower?”

At this, Nadine couldn't suppress a smirk.

All at once, she took off running straight at Goliath like a raging bull, dodging a hailstorm of Fireballs as she went. He saw this and donned an eerie, sadistic smile—one that said he was sure of his imminent victory. That he would enjoy crushing his weak little opponent.

She was nearly upon him now, her blade glittering in the light. Meanwhile, he imbued his staff with mana and swung it down—

“Huh...?” He let out a confused grunt as his weapon cut through empty air. “She vanished...?”

He stared down blankly at his staff for a moment. Then it hit him.

“Blast—!”

But by the time the Master Mercenary had turned around, it was all too late.

“.....Huh?!”

Katherine Foxxi yelped in confusion as she felt cold metal touch her neck. Nadine was behind her. *How?* How did she do it? Katherine knew she should've been completely protected. She was certain their attacks should have hit the healer.

“...That went over my headddd... literallyyyy... Damn, you got meeee...” Goliath grumbled miserably.

Just before Goliath's swing could connect, Laplace had scooped Nadine up with her magic and sent her sailing up and over him. Then she'd quietly deposited her right behind Katherine.

“Forfeit or die. Your choice.”

Nadine glared at Katherine from behind the round lenses of her glasses, so fiercely it felt as though she were about to plunge the knife in at any moment.



“Aah...!”

Her instincts were screaming that she was in mortal danger. Her legs shook. And then she felt something warm and wet hit her feet.

In her fright, Katherine... had wet herself.

Instantly her face flushed red with shame. She wanted to scream. This wasn't supposed to happen. She'd wanted to turn heads, but not like this!

“Ggghhh...! I forfeit!” Katherine began to sob uncontrollably. “Don't kill me...!”

A beat later, the referee's voice rang out across the stadium: “We have a winner, folks! Championship match, round one goes to... Lilium!!!”

For a brief moment, the arena fell silent—and then the crowd exploded into cheers.

6

“Welcome back, ladies!” Tanya exclaimed as Laplace and Nadine walked back over to the bench.

Nadine stiffened, wary.

“I can't believe it! You used levitation magic on Nadine to get her into the opponent's blind spot?! When did you guys rehearse that?!”

“Hahaha! I'm afraid that's our little secret. Isn't that right, Nadine?” Laplace grinned.

As for Nadine... she'd never imagined that splendid midnight stroll through mid-air would come in handy during the *Sparring Tournament*, of all things. Her body still felt light and floaty, and for some reason this made her feel a little bashful.

“Yeah... Haha... Honestly, we're fortunate our opponents were too busy grandstanding to take us seriously. And we caught Goliath off-guard completely by chance.” Fidgeting, she tugged on her sleeve.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me! I never knew you were such a badass, Nadine!

Why didn't you tell us?! Wait... I know... you wanted it to be a surprise, didn't you?!"

"Oh, um... well... you see..."

Steeling herself, Nadine resolved to tell them the truth—the whole truth.

"Wow... You really went through a lot, huh, Nadine?"

"No, no, it's no big deal. Really, I'm just... touched that you still want to be my friend. I can't express how much that means to me. So in exchange, Tanya, I'll serve as your blade. The Assassin class is a master-level class, you know. So I'll just change back, and once I switch out my equipment, I can be more useful and —"

"...What are you talking about?"

"Huh?"

Tanya stared at her in blank bafflement, a look Nadine returned in full.

"Is... Isn't that what you want...?"

No... Maybe she doesn't feel comfortable having an Assassin around... But just as Nadine hung her head—

"Not at all! Look, you *wanted* to be a Healer, right?"

"Oh... Well... Yes, but..."

"Then who cares if you're good at it? Who cares if you're 'useful'? I admit, it really grinds my gears when they try to tell us women are 'supposed' to be Healers, but if it's what you actually want to do for a living, then so be it! So what if you're Level 3? Do what makes you happy!"

The words made Nadine's chest ache, and she bit her lip. Yes... She had chosen of her own free will to forsake the path of a killer. She didn't want to hurt—she wanted to heal.

"But I'm only Level 3!"

I'm useless, and I won't get any stronger. Am I allowed to live my life this way?

"Seriously, who cares!" Tanya donned her usual carefree grin—the grin

Nadine so dearly loved. "You're Liliu's Healer, and that's that!"

Hearing this, she couldn't possibly hold back her tears.

"Wehh... weeehhhh...!"

The drops smeared her lenses. *How long has it been since I last cried? Years?*

"Nnn... weehh... bbbhhhwееееаааhhh!!! Hhhggghhh!!!"

"Uh, Nadine?! Those are some really weird crying sounds!"

At Tanya's remark, Laplace burst out laughing. "Hahaha! Reminds me of someone we know!"

"Gah...!"

"Hee hee... Go on and cry it out, Nadine. We're all girls here, you know?" she continued.

It was the same thing she had told Tanya that day in the wasteland.

Women are so emotional. Women think they can cry their way out of anything. Society was filled with stock phrases designed to steal away a woman's right to cry. *Well, fuck that,* Tanya thought. *Everyone's gotta cry sometimes.*

As Nadine sobbed, Tanya pulled her into her arms, then looked over at Laplace. Together, they recited:

"And sometimes a girl's just gotta cry."

"Whew... Setting aside everything with my father," Nadine began after she'd composed herself once more, "there were... other reasons I didn't want to identify as a female Assassin."

"You didn't want people to mistrust you or something?" Tanya asked.

Nadine shook her head. "No... When I worked as an Assassin, I'd sometimes encounter older men who'd ask 'So, if you're a femme fatale, does that mean you do sex stuff on the side?' But I never understood how they'd reached that conclusion."

This was one of many reasons why being in a female-dominated class was

simply easier.

“*WHAT?!?* You totally should’ve gone all Assassin on their asses!” Tanya shouted.

Chapter 9: Calm Before the Storm

1

“Well then, I’ll be seeing you, Katherine.”

Blushing, Katherine Foxxi watched as the girl with glasses and lavender braids—Nadine Amaryllis—walked away. Nadine was so calm and quiet now—nothing like the bloodthirsty monster she’d encountered in the arena.

All those years since adventuring school, and she still carried the same gracefulness of a wallflower.

“Rrrrrgh! Who IS she?! Nobody told me she could do that stuff!” Katherine growled under her breath.

She had peed herself in front of a giant crowd.

After the match, the medical tent had offered her a bath towel; she took it and bolted straight to the women’s restroom, where she had hastily washed her bikini bottoms in the sink and put them back on dripping wet. Fortunately it wasn’t too noticeable.

On her way to the restroom, she’d passed a handful of male adventurers in the hall... but none of them even looked at her. Worse still, she’d been flirting indiscriminately prior to the match in the hopes of reeling in some husband material, so a lot of those men were people she knew.

She’d put so much care and effort into her clothes and hair... flirted and fawned... and for what? *I make ONE mistake and now they all want to act like I don’t exist?*

Thinking back, whenever she’d gotten wasted in the bars, men would hit on her, but they wouldn’t look out for her. And after all the compliments she’d given Ryan, where was he now? Certainly not here to help her.

But right as her self-esteem hit rock bottom and she felt the tears welling up,

there came a knock at the door.

“Are you alright in there?”

Katherine opened the stall door a crack. Standing there was none other than Nadine Amaryllis, her sparring opponent. But apparently she wasn't here to point and laugh; no, she was holding a change of clothes.

Wordlessly, Nadine put the spare clothes in her arms. Then she cast Heal on the tiny scratch on Katherine's cheek.

“Our party leader has a message for you, Miss Katherine Foxxi. She says your Fireball fusion spell was phenomenal, and you're clearly talented and creative. Also, would you like to grab a drink sometime? ...Er, that last part isn't part of the message. I've just always wanted to talk to you, that's all.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Back in adventuring school, I remember you would always stay behind after class to practice your spells. I think perhaps you and I have different ideas of *cleverness*, per se, but... I'd like to talk to you regardless.” After a pause, she finished, “Well then, see you around, Katherine.”

And with that, she quietly walked away. Instead of mocking Katherine for being all bark and no bite, she... complimented her technique.

Blushing furiously, she grumbled to herself, her fox ears drooping pitifully. And if someone with particularly good hearing was in the vicinity, they might have heard the following:

“Hmph... Her Heal spell didn't even work! What a joke!”

Followed by:

“Rrgh... Don't be so nice to me... You're going to win me over, damn it...”

Followed by:

“...Maybe I should be more like them... Stop caring about men and marriage and just... focus on myself for a change.”



2

On the bench, they could feel the crowd's building excitement as the second round of the championship match drew ever nearer.

"I'm baaaack!" Nadine called. "The second round hasn't started yet, I take it?"

"Nope, not yet. How's Katherine holding up?" asked Tanya. Apparently she'd made a mess of herself right at the end of the doubles match, and as it happened, it was Tanya's idea to go and deliver a change of clothes to her.

"I think she'll be fine, but I didn't want to stand there and have an entire conversation with her in the bathroom, so I cut it short."

"Tell me, how did she like those custom-made clothes from the Great Sorceress herself?"

"Well, she took them without complaint, so I suppose she must've liked them well enough."

"Heh heh heh! Of course she did! Because I have great taste!"

Indeed, it was Laplace who took Tanya's spare blouse and transformed it into a frilly robe. Frankly, her magic was a total mystery, even to a fellow caster like Tanya. She didn't understand how Laplace managed to add all those little details, like lace and needlework, but apparently it was something akin to a hobby for her. *What are you, a grandma?*

"Oh, say, Laplace—er, Stone Cold Stunner?"

"My beauty is at your service! What do you need?"

"Well, the second round is starting soon, and I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

"Are you sure you want to forfeit?" Tanya asked, frowning.

But Laplace simply laughed. "Well, I have to, don't I? Otherwise you won't get your big chance to pummel Ryan into the pavement!"

"I mean, that's true, but... the crowd's going to get mad at you, you know..."

After all, the Sparring Tournament was Ode's most famous spectacle.

"Ce n'est pas grave. I don't mind if they boo me. It's nothing compared to 300 years of solitude!"

In the background, they could hear the fanfare heralding the start of round two.

"C'mon, you don't have to punish yourself like this!"

Laplace laughed. "It's fine. I'm used to everyone making me the bad guy."

"Laplace..."

"I'm the Wicked Dragonwhore, remember?"

And with that, she walked—er, floated—off towards the arena.

"I forfeiiiiit!"

Sure enough, Laplace's singsong voice was met with the indignant screams of those who had been eagerly looking forward to a final clash between ultimate adventurer Goliath the Master Mercenary and Stone Cold Stunner, the mysterious Mage. Examples:

"This is bullshit!"

"Don't be a coward!"

"I demand a refund!"

...among other comments best not repeated here. The poor referee looked utterly perplexed, too.

"Good grief... some things never change," Laplace muttered to herself.

Amid heavy booing (and Goliath complaining about how badly he'd wanted to spar with her), she turned and walked back to the bench. *Mon dieu, these people are so bloodthirsty.*

Behind her, the referee announced Goliath's automatic victory, and the jeering grew even louder... but she didn't mind. This way the tournament would progress to round three, the leader match. And there, Tanya would carry out her revenge.

“Laplace!”

“Hi, Tanya.”

The other woman’s expression was grim. Evidently the crowd’s reaction was just as bad as she’d anticipated—no, perhaps worse—and now she was worried for Laplace’s emotional well-being.

“Come now. Why the long face?”

“Well...!”

As she fell silent, Laplace reached out and cupped her cheeks in both hands. Her palms felt cool against Tanya’s skin. Then she pulled Tanya close—

“Whoa!” she squeaked quietly as her face flushed red. *She’s in my bubble again!*

“This is no time to be frowning! The thrilling climax to your tale of revenge is nearly upon us!” the kindhearted Sorceress exclaimed with a smile. “Let’s see that evil sneer!”

“What evil sneer?!”

“You know the one! You do it all the time!”

“No I don’t!”

Beside them, Nadine giggled. And in the distance, they heard the fanfare heralding the start of the final round.

3

Meanwhile, on the opponent’s bench:

“I’M QUITTING!!!” Ryan screamed at the top of his lungs.

“You’re just going to have to suck it up and get out there, Leader.”

“NOOOO!!! Nobody told me I was gonna have to fight!!!”

“Those are the rules.”

“Damn you, Goliath! Some ‘Master Mercenary’ you turned out to be! You’re just a vagrant, a bum! I want my money back!” Ryan shouted as Goliath returned to the bench.

But Goliath simply kept walking without so much as acknowledging the glare on Ryan’s face.

“HEY! I paid a fortune for this, remember?!”

At this, Goliath exhaled. Then he turned and tossed something to Ryan’s feet—a leather satchel with silver coins inside. This was the payment Ryan had originally given Goliath.

“Wh... You bastard!”

“I’m done here, pallll. I came here excited to crush some weaklings, but right when I finally get a singles match, the lady foooorfeits? I’m so pent up, I’m gonna diiiiie,” he explained in a singsong voice. But in the next moment, all cheer and jest evaporated from his tone. “Then again... I did get an unexpected boon, I suppose. I ought to thank you... now I have something worthwhile to report to Lord Maxwell.”

“Huh? What unexpected boon? I’m totally screwed because of you!”

But the mysterious adventurer simply ignored him and walked off. “See ya.”

“Rrgh... Goddamn it...!” Ryan growled through gritted teeth. The plan was to let a mercenary do all the work so they could take home the trophy without him having to risk his own skin. *This all worked out perfectly fine last year! What makes this year so different, damn it?!*

“Man... Our team’s nothing without Tanya,” one of the senior party members lamented.

“Th-That’s not true! We don’t need her!”

“But without her, the work’s starting to pile up, and now we’re in the red for this month...”

“Urk...!”

“It’s not just the accounting, either. We’re behind on our Guild paperwork, too. Tanya always used to do it months in advance.”

“It’d end up riddled with corrections, of course, but still... looking back, she really did a lot for us.”

The other party members all nodded in agreement.

“How come we had to fire her, anyway...?” someone whispered.

“And now we have to fight her?” whined someone else.

Damn it, why are you all taking HER side?! I’m a nice guy! I was just trying to make sure she wouldn’t end up an old maid! Besides, you all totally agreed we should do it... and now look at her! She’s totally gonna kick my ass!

Ryan thought back to the murderous aura he’d sensed that night at the Little Vixen... and shuddered.

“...Alright. There’s only one thing to do,” Ryan muttered. He straightened up to his full height, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief before he announced: “I’M GONNA FORFEIT, TOO!!!”

“Don’t be stupid, Leader!”

“Yeah! You heard the crowd out there! If you forfeit, they’ll never hire us for another gig as long as we live!”

“Just go out there and let Tanya whoop your ass so we can get second place, okay?!”

“Shut up! I’m not fighting!” Ryan shouted. But before he could leave the arena—

“Aww, what’s the matter, Ryan?”

“Huh?! Oh! Katherine!”

Indeed, there stood Katherine, wearing her new change of clothes and blocking his exit. While this new style was decidedly more modest, the frills and elaborate needlework on the sleeves suited her personality nicely. Relieved, Ryan hurried over to her.

“I... I was so worried about you!”

“Says the guy who didn’t even bother to check up on me.”

“Huh?”

“You know how to say all the right things, but when I need you the most, you’re never there. You’re an asshole.”

“Wh... Excuse me? You can’t talk to me like that! Thanks to your epic screw up, I’m totally fucked!”

“I beg your pardon? You’ve been skipping out for far too long. It’s time for you to pay your dues, you coward! And besides...” She smiled faintly. “Just listen to that crowd!”

“Huh?”

He shifted his focus to the sound in the distance. At some point the audience had stopped booing at Laplace, and now...

“You can do it, Liliun!”

“Go get him, Tanya!”

“Kick his ass!”

“Is Stone Cold Stunner feeling okay?!”

“You’re a badass, Nadine!”

...nearly the entire arena was cheering in support of Tanya and her friends—mostly female voices, but with some male voices mixed in as well.

“You don’t need me to tell you what’ll happen if you forfeit now, right? So suck it up and get out there, Ryan.”

“Eeek!”

The other party members glared daggers at him as they slowly boxed him in.

“Aah... wh... AAAAAAAGGGGHHHH!!!”

Ryan’s scream echoed across the stadium. And with the fanfare heralding the start of the third and final round, the crowd’s cheers grew to a deafening roar...

Chapter 10: Tanya's Revenge

1

"Mmgghh! Hnngg! Nnngggh!"

I forfeit. I give up. I surrender. Ryan tried again and again to get the words out, but for some reason his lips remained firmly closed against his will.

"What the hell...?"

And yet, for some reason he could say anything else with no trouble at all. *What's going on? Is this a curse? I've never heard of a curse that forbids you from saying specific phrases!*

"...Mmmggghhh!" *I GIVE UP!* "MMMMGGGGHHHHN!!!" *I FORFEIT!!!*

No dice.

"What's the matter, Ryan? Cat got your tongue?" Tanya sneered.

Meanwhile, far behind her on the bench, Laplace sat with an amused smirk on her face. Naturally, it was she who had cursed Ryan to be incapable of forfeiting. And of course, her spell was extremely powerful.

"Heh heh heh... Anything's a piece of cake for the Great Sorceress!"

"Nom nom... Tha'sh incredible, Laplashe," Nadine exclaimed through a mouthful of food. Currently she was leaning back with her feet up, enjoying a plate of bone-in sausages. Apparently, no one had ever taught her not to talk with her mouth full. "Do you want beer or wine? I'll call someone over for us."

"Oh, I'd love a glass of wine, thank you."

"Okay! Let's get some appetizers while we're at it. The food here is actually really good!"

Evidently the two of them were planning to treat Ryan's humiliating defeat like the spectacle it was, complete with popcorn.

“...Now then, are you ready, Laplace?”

“*Oui, oui*. Let’s do it!”

Surrounded by carnival food and alcohol, Nadine cleared her throat. Then she picked up the spoon they’d given her with her chicken fried rice, turned it around, and held it to her lips.

Laplace snapped her fingers—

“Alllllright, ladies and gentlemen! Here we are at the Sparring Tournament championship match, round three! Reporting to you live, I’m Nadine Amaryllis! And for commentary, I have here with me—”

“Stone Cold Stunner, unrivaled beauty, at your service! *Bonjour!*”

—and so the two began their high-energy coverage of the match. As Nadine’s voice boomed across the stadium, the audience came alive with confused murmurs.

“Wh... What’s going on?! How is her voice so loud?”

“Maybe it’s some newfangled magical artifact...?”

Meanwhile...

“Oh my! Ryan’s flung himself onto the ground! Perfect form, arc—yes, and he’s stuck the landing! It’s like he was *born* to prostrate himself!”

“Mmm... But you can’t really sense any sincerity in it, can you?”

“Indeed... My report here says Ryan’s spent his whole life thinking a half-assed apology will get him out of anything.”

“*Oui, oui*. And I’m told he still hasn’t paid Tanya that 50,000 seculs he borrowed from her back in adventuring school! He’s just not very responsible, is he?”

Murmurs of “Wow...” and “What a dick...” could be heard throughout the crowd.

“Whoa! Realizing his apology isn’t working, Ryan’s now started to lick her boots!”

“Talk about a lack of dignity.”

“WOW! Tanya just kicked him square in the face!”

“Hahaha! He should’ve seen that one coming. Nobody wants your nasty saliva on their shoes!”

“That’s an extremely good point, actually! Nothing about that seemed apologetic in the least! Oh... It seems Ryan’s crying pretty hard out there.”

“...Nope! Crocodile tears.”

“And there it is! HE’S FAKING IT, FOLKS! This grown man is FAKE CRYING!”

“Oh, and now he’s mad that we saw through it.”

“He’s literal trash!!!”

At this, the crowd burst out laughing, at Ryan’s expense, of course.

“Good lord! Is this seriously the team that placed second last year?”

“Well, Tanya was on their team last year, so.”

“This dude sure loved to brag about being the party leader. What a joke!”

“I think I’m done hiring them for quests...”

“Yeah... I’ll ask the Guild to blacklist them.”

And so the market value of Ryan’s party took a sharp nosedive.

“Oh! Tanya’s shot off a Fireball!”

“You see, normally a Magi-Knight’s mana circuits are optimized to pass mana through their sword. But Tanya’s so talented, she can still cast the regular way! She never ceases to amaze!”

“Uh-oh! Ryan’s clothes have caught fire! You’re on fire, sir! Now he’s running around like a chicken with its head cut off! That won’t help you, Ryan! Get with the program, come on!”

“Aha! This must be part of Tanya’s strategy.”

“How so?”

“Did you catch that statement from Ryan just now? ‘I’ll do whatever you want, so please, help me!’”

“He did say that, didn’t he? Ooh, Tanya just swung her sword! She’s fired a massive torrent of Water Magic straight at Ryan!”

“Oof... The hydraulic pressure just sent him flying. And what a spectacular flight it was!”

“You know, Ryan’s technically supposed to be a Knight, but I’m not seeing any Knight skills.”

“Oh yeah, about that. Apparently he cheated or hired proxies for all his tests in adventuring school. He’s less of a Knight and more of a Gambler, if you ask me!”

With Nadine’s commentary and the ravishing Stone Cold Stunner’s analysis, the crowd’s opinion of Ryan began to sour like old milk.

Meanwhile, Ryan staggered to his feet, clutching at his ashen, hole-ridden clothes.

“Mmmgggaaahhh!” *Please, just let me forfeit!*

But Laplace’s magic held fast. What a fearsome curse it was.

“Now then, Ryan...” Tanya walked up in front of him, grinning. “What was it you said just now? You’ll do *anything?*”

Ryan took one look at her sinister sneer and shrieked. “*I’ll do anything! Just don’t hurt meeee!*”

Around them, the arena reverberated with spectators screaming Tanya’s name. Holding her naked sword, she readily shifted into a fighting stance; Ryan stumbled backwards and fell onto his rear. And as Tanya slowly inched closer, he shrieked and scrambled back even further.

Then, finally, his back collided with the wall. The crowd’s cheers began to swell in anticipation of the knockout blow. He was just such a pushover—completely incompetent. And in a match between the woman who had done all the heavy lifting and the man who had lazily foisted it upon her, it was plain to see who would come out on top.

His voice came back to her: *I’m sorry, but you’re off the team. You’re a woman, Tanya.*

“Heh heh... Don’t think for a minute I’m going to make this painless for you.”

“Aah... aaah...!”

The look in her eyes was cold. Unfeeling.

He shrieked and trembled as she lifted her sword high into the air—

“IT’S SHOWTIIIME!”

2

“...I’ve never been so humiliated...”

Ryan fell to his knees as laughter and ridicule rained down upon him. This was all so cruel and heartless.

For some reason, Tanya had kept his poetry notebook from seventh grade, and now she was forcing him to read it aloud. Yes, that’s right—his dark past, brought to light in front of a giant crowd! Pure evil!

And the audience was *loving* it.

“†The Scarlet-Black Fallen Angel†...? Pick a color and stick to it!”

“Oh my god, my SIDES! Hey, ‘Ebon King of the Cursed Eye’! Can you speak up a bit? Some of us folks in the back can’t hear you!”

“Somebody get this guy a book deal!”

“The love interest has ‘thorny lips’? Sounds like she needs some chapstick!”

Tears welled in his eyes as he looked at Tanya, practically doubled over and shrieking with laughter. *How could you do this to me, you monster?* Behind her, the audience was *radiating* second-hand embarrassment. At his expense! *Ugh, kill me now... Goddamn it... I need to get back at her!*

He lowered his hand into his pocket—the one section of his pants that mercifully remained intact. Sure enough, he still had his trump card... Summoning his resolve, he grabbed it and pulled it out.

“Fuck it! TAKE THIS!”

“Whoa!”

It was a spherical object approximately the size of his palm. This magical artifact contained a mixture of mana and a Fire Magic spell, all carefully compressed within; in other words, it was a bomb.

And when he flung it at Tanya's feet, it exploded with a small, rumbling *BOOM*.

The spectators screamed in fear and anger. These bombs were reserved for clearing passages through dungeons or in fights against large-scale monsters, like dragons. It was certainly *not* the sort of item a Knight was meant to smuggle into a sparring match.

"Ha... hahaha... I did it... I did it!" Ryan laughed triumphantly. This was the laugh of a man who reacted to a little roasting session by throwing *a literal bomb* at his own childhood friend and former teammate. "It... It was all her fault... She pushed me to it! Well, that's what you get when you act like a bitch! Haha! Hahahaha!"

Meanwhile, the audience was in an uproar over his unfair tactics. But just as they were starting to think he'd stolen the win out from under her—

"Whoa there! Last I checked, †The Scarlet-Black Fallen Angel† was supposed to be a Knight, but here he is throwing bombs!"

"*Beurk!* Yikes! Cringe! Don't be a coward, †The Scarlet-Black Fallen Angel†! Fight her fair and square!"

Once again, Nadine and Laplace had started broadcasting their commentary across the stadium. The alcohol must have kicked in, because their enthusiasm level was at an all-time high. Indeed, they didn't even sound *remotely* worried.

After all, it would take more than a point-blank explosion to bring down Tanya Artemiciov, the leader of Liliium.

3

Sure enough, as the flames crackled and the dust settled, she slowly came into view once more.

"Wow, that was rude."

“Eeeek! Tanya?! Wha... *wha*...?!”

“What was that for, asshole?!”

She was completely unharmed. Not even a scratch.

“Aaaand Tanya’s okay! No damage taken, folks!”

“Heh heh heh! All thanks to her custom armor hand-made by yours truly, Stone Cold Stunner! That measly bomb could never put even a dent in it!”

“Fascinating! I doubt traditional women’s equipment could measure up to that!”

“*Oui, oui*! Nice and warm around the midriff, too!”

“I love it!”

“Place your orders today and you’ll receive a bonus Stone Cold Stunner mini-poster absolutely free!”

The women in the crowd began to murmur excitedly amongst themselves, while the men’s ears perked up at the prospect of a pin-up poster.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! Goddamn it!” Ryan wailed, digging around in his pocket once more.

“What’s next? Gonna spam me with bombs? Not a great look.”

“Shut up! This is my last resort—a little gift from Goliath himself! And it’s totally badass, just FYI!”

“Right.”

Indeed, the bomb wasn’t his only trump card. This time he pulled out a little scrap of paper.

“Wait... That’s—!” A split second later, Tanya recognized the pattern drawn onto it. “Stop!”

It was a summoning talisman, a magical artifact with a magic circle drawn onto it. As the name suggests, these were used to summon all manner of monsters, mythical beasts, spirits, and so on. Ordinarily, a talisman of that size could be expected to summon a familiar spirit at most, but—

“It’s so detailed!”

Indeed, this elaborate magic circle painstakingly covered every last centimeter of the scrap of paper. The most adept summoners were capable of forcibly teleporting magical beings across even time, including powerful creatures that had gone nearly extinct in recent years, such as dragons or unicorns. However, it generally required forming a contract with the beast or otherwise taming it beforehand, and as one might expect, Ryan had no such ability.

“Are you out of your mind?! Stop!”

But the hard look in his eyes told her he was going to do it anyway. Sure enough, he raised the talisman high into the air.

“Mwahahahaha! Bow before me!” He pricked his finger to produce the drop of blood necessary for the summon spell to activate. “Ouch! That really smarts! Ugh, now I’m bleeding... Gross...”

As he smeared his blood across the magic circle, a strong wind kicked up as the mana circuits within the talisman began to activate.

“Ryan! Stop!” Tanya screamed.

“Make me!”

“Stop this now, and you won’t be a villain—you’ll just be another loser. But if you go through with this, and summon a freaking *dragon* in a public space with thousands of innocent people present? There’ll be chaos!”

“I know—that’s why I’m doing it! I summon you, dragon! Crush this harlot who dared to make a mockery of me!”

As the summon talisman floated out of Ryan’s hand and up into the air, it spontaneously caught fire. This tiny flame grew bigger and bigger until—

“Oh god... A Red Dragon...!”

Tanya swallowed hard. Of all the breeds, he just *had* to summon the one with the worst temperament—and in terms of strength, it was number one with a bullet. The Red Dragon was also considered to be an endangered species, and as such, it was grossly inappropriate to summon one in a battle.

Screams broke out all across the arena. The parties here were almost all Rank C or below; they were all *vastly* under-equipped to handle a Red Dragon.

“What the hell?!”

“A dragon?!”

“†The Scarlet-Black Fallen Angel† summoned a damn dragon!”

“Oh god, we gotta get out of here!”

However, as the spectators started to panic, two loud (but oddly calm) voices joined the fray:

“Hey, folks? Everything’s alright! Let’s all settle down!”

“Everyone please remain calm. There’s no need to panic.”

Laplace and Nadine each spoke directly to the audience.

“You have nothing to fear! Not while Tanya’s here to protect you!”

At this, the crowd began to murmur, perplexed.

Wielding her oversized sword, Tanya held her ground, and stared directly into the dragon’s eyes. As it roared, flames burst forth from its maw—

“Gyaaah! Hot, hot, hot!” Whimpering, Ryan abandoned all pretense of composure and hastily put some distance between himself and his summon. *As usual, he refuses to take responsibility for his actions...*

“Oh, no... Look out!”

The stream of flames was rapidly closing in on the spectators. They wouldn’t escape in time—

Water Magic, engage!

Tanya swung her sword, firing a torrent of water that blocked the fire’s path. Someone in the audience screamed as a cloud of steam rose up with a loud hiss.

“Ugh, I’m so sorry... You poor thing. You weren’t expecting to have to do this... You must be scared to death right now,” she murmured to the dragon. She knew she could probably take it down with an Explosion, the same way

she'd done with the rampaging Wyvern in the Western Wasteland. But when she thought about it, this Red Dragon was really just another of Ryan's victims, and she couldn't help but empathize.

Cast debuff! Water Magic, engage! Add Earth Magic support!

She quietly circulated her mana to her sword. In addition to its offensive abilities, Water Magic was known for its robust variety of buffs, debuffs, and recovery spells.

"I'm sorry about this, Big Red."

She swung her sword in an upward motion—

"Rrrrrrrroooarrr?!"

—and a cloud of mist engulfed the mighty creature. Instantly, its eyelids drooped, and with a dull *WHAM*, it collapsed to the arena floor, sound asleep.

4

"Wh... What just happened?"

"Did she just cast Somniferous Mist?"

"What? But that's only an intermediate-level spell! There's no way that would work on a dragon unless you had a whole platoon of Court Grand Mages!"

"It's not supposed to take effect that quickly, either... Have Magi-Knights always been this overpowered?!"

As the Red Dragon snored softly, the spectators buzzed with a mix of trepidation and relief.

"Incredible... She's a saint...!"

Just then, the two commentators cut in:

"Is everyone alright out there? I know that was pretty intense, but lest you forget, this match isn't over just yet!" Nadine exclaimed.

"Oui, oui! The show must go on!" said Stone Cold Stunner—er, Laplace.

At this, the crowd's attention returned to the competitors once more.

Meanwhile, in the ring, Ryan had officially dug his own grave.

“Ryyyyyyaaaaannnn?”

“Wait! Look, um... I wasn’t...!”

“Hahaha! Relax! I wasn’t really expecting you to fight me fair and square. I mean, that would just be embarrassing for you. But here’s the thing—there’s a line, and you definitely crossed it.”

All around her, the earth itself pulsed with invisible energy as she stared down at the ground, her hair hiding her expression from view.

“Hee hee... hee hee hee...”

Then he heard her giggling creepily to herself, and he knew he was going to die.

“From twilight I summon the ultimate destruction.”

She was casting Explosion, an Arcane-level spell. Depending on the skill of the caster, it was the sort of spell that could single-handedly demolish a castle or an entire army.

“Eeeegh! You’re using that on the *dragon*, right?! Right, Tanya?!”

Meanwhile, she continued her incantation. Ordinarily, as a Magi-Knight, all she really needed to do was focus her mana into her sword... and yet...

“Ashes to ashes.”

She wasn’t going to catch him off-guard with a surprise attack. She was going to come at him head-on and crush him *solely* with carefully honed skill.

With her mana circuits optimized for the Magi-Knight class, she had to be more careful and precise than she ever was as a regular Mage. She used her sword in place of a staff, refining her mana and steadily converting it into magical energy.

“Dust to dust.”

Seeing Ryan go weak in the knees and start crying for his mama filled Tanya with deep glee, and the corner of her lips curled in a smirk.

“Heed my call—”

“S-Stop! Don’t do this, Tanyaaaa!!! I’ll... I’ll pay you back all the money I skimmed from your wages!!!”

“—and unleash your might!”

A gleam of light flashed from the tip of her blade—



“EXPLOSION!!!”

“STOP! PLEASE! I’LL BUY YOU A DESIGNER PURSE OR SOMETHING!!!”

“THIS IS EXACTLY THE KIND OF SHIT I’M TIRED OF, RYAN, YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!!! GO TO HELL!!!”

But the instant she swung her sword down—for some reason, she thought she heard Laplace snap her fingers.

There was a moment of silence... and then a thunderous *BOOOOM* erupted as a pillar of light shot up into the sky. The crowd screamed—whether out of fear or excitement, she couldn’t tell. Fortunately, the spell was masterfully contained so as to avoid causing any collateral damage.

And so Ryan vanished into the beam of light, leaving Tanya standing there in a dust cloud ten times more impressive than his measly bomb, her skirt fluttering in the blast, her pink hair flying.

5

After a prolonged silence, the audience began to buzz once more. The dust settled, and there lay Ryan, charred black, groaning under his breath.

But just as they were about to celebrate Tanya’s victory—a low growl rumbled across the arena. The Red Dragon was awake once more.

“Wha...?!”

Dark red flames flickered in its mouth. And the flames of a Red Dragon were purportedly so hot they could melt steel.

“Oh god... Run! The Red Dragon’s awake!”

The crowd’s joy quickly turned to panic. After all, there was no telling whether the Somniferous Mist would work a second time. Tanya hastily dropped into a fighting stance—

“Gah...!”

—but her legs buckled.

She was out of mana.

While Tanya's mana capacity was higher than the average Mage's due to her rigorous training regimen, she had used it all up over the course of the tournament, and that final Explosion had officially drained the last dregs.

I have to do something!

Desperate for a solution, Tanya's gaze wandered in search of the Great Sorceress.

"Come, Your Highness. We must get you to safety," said Maxwell, the Court Grand Mage.

"No." Arianora answered quiet, yet firm. "Not until my citizens are safely evacuated. Get word to the Imperial Knights and call for a magical platoon to be dispatched at once!"

Maxwell's eyes narrowed as he stared out at the hulking Red Dragon. "As the Crown Princess of our great Empire, your safety comes first and foremost."

"No, *my people* come first. Besides, it's my duty to bear witness to the events that transpire here today." After all, few would think highly of a noble that thought first of saving her own skin.

"Personally, I would prefer not to risk any damage to your body," Maxwell spat under his breath. He snapped his fingers, and a force field activated around the entire stadium.

"Whoa... Very impressive, Your Eminence!" one of the arena guards exclaimed, awestruck. While all he really did was flip the switch on an existing security measure, it normally required the mana of five to ten Mages to activate.

"Hmph. They're lucky I haven't completed my research on a personal-sized barrier. Otherwise I would've used that for just the two of us," Maxwell sneered, staring down at the arena below.

How could one little girl possibly hope to defeat a Red Dragon?

The air around them grew more and more tense as the dragon's mana steadily built. Tanya could hear Nadine's voice in the background, calmly and precisely directing the spectators to help them evacuate. Meanwhile, she ran through a handful of mental scenarios, desperately searching for a solution to this crisis.

Just then, something soft touched her cheek. "Tanya."

"Wh... Laplace?!"

Laplace's velvety fingers wiped the soot from Tanya's cheek. "What's your plan? If you're out of mana, I can lend you as much as you need."

"But...!"

Back in the Western Wasteland, extenuating circumstances had forced her to slaughter the Wyvern. But this Red Dragon was an innocent creature summoned into servitude at Ryan's behest. The last thing she wanted to do was end its life. It deserved better than that.

"Hmm... That spell you used earlier—that was Somniferous Mist, *non*?"

"Y-Yeah...?" Normally this spell was only strong enough to tranquilize enemies.

"I see, I see. It appears my invention has been watered down quite a bit."

"Wait, what?! You *invented* Somniferous Mist?!"

"*Oui, oui.* And I believe your beloved Explosion originated from one of my creations as well."

"*Oh my god, that's incredible!*" Tanya gushed gleefully. She was always ready to geek out over magic, regardless of time or place. "We should talk more about this som—mmmph?!"

Just then, Laplace pressed her lips to Tanya's, cutting her off. She could feel mana flowing into her body—*wait, what are you thinking, Laplace?! Not here! Not in front of this huge audience!!!*

"Mmm... There you go. You see, Tanya, Somniferous Mist wasn't originally meant to put the victim to sleep. It was designed to nullify their mana entirely."

“Nullify their mana?!” *But mana’s the source of all life! You can’t nullify it! That’d be like cutting someone’s arm off and expecting them not to bleed!*

Indeed, it was a near-impossible feat... in terms of modern magic, anyway.

“I admit, using it on human subjects led to some... *significant* side effects, so I stopped testing on them... but surely a creature of that size could handle it, no problem.”

With that, Laplace snapped her fingers, summoning a giant magic circle beneath their feet.

“Holy crap... How did you create such a complex spell formula in an instant?!”

“Hee hee! Because I’m the Great Sorceress, of course! And this is a very old spell.” Grinning, she floated into the air. “Now go on, Tanya. Cast Somniferous Mist again. My custom-made magic circle is here to support you!”

“Oh... uh, okay...” Tanya focused her mana once more. *Cast debuff! Water Magic, engage! Add Earth Magic support!* “Ready!”

She could feel mana flowing into her from the massive, complex magic circle at her feet and steadily gathering in her sword as if drawn to her spell.

Then she kicked off from the ground, leaping straight at the Red Dragon’s head, its scarlet flames still flickering at the ready.

“GOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

She raised her Not-Excalibur over her head, then swung it down, slicing the empty air as it fired off a second round of mist.

In the next moment, the dragon’s fire breath... was summarily snuffed out.

“Grrrff... rrrfff...!” The Red Dragon writhed to and fro, its eyes glassy.
“Grrroo... arrchoo!!!”

A strong wind kicked up, blustering in Tanya’s ears. Riding the air current, she landed a short distance away.

But this “attack” carried no mana, no destructive force. It was simply—

“Was... Was that just a sneeze...?”

“Grrrrnnn... grrrph...” Its eyelids drooped... and then the Red Dragon returned

to a cozy slumber once more.

Meanwhile, the sneeze had landed a direct hit on Ryan's unconscious body, knocking him away and blowing off the last unburnt scraps of his clothing. He landed squarely on his back—naked as the day he was born.

“Would you look at that, folks? For shame! You'd never guess he was an adventurer with a body like that!”

“Hahaha! I have to say, †The Scarlet-Black Fallen Angel† looked a lot better with his clothes on!”

The fervor of the crowd grew so loud, it nearly drowned out Nadine and Laplace's commentary. The contrast between Tanya's smart, efficient dragon takedown and Ryan's sheer incompetence was frankly overwhelming.

“Not to worry, everyone! Tanya appears to have ‘defanged’ the Red Dragon once again!”

“*Oui, oui!* That overgrown lizard is now as harmless as your grandma's pet cat!”

“Feel free to come by and pet him before you go!”

The relief in the air was palpable. At last, the nightmare was over.

“And that's a wrap, folks! This is Nadine Amaryllis, signing off!”

“Ethereal beauty Stone Cold Stunner, signing off!”

Then someone in the crowd shouted something that sounded like, “Man, fuck that guy!” Whoever it was, Tanya was tempted to buy them a beer.

“W-W-We have a winner!” the referee stammered. “This year's champions: Lilium, led by Tanya Artemiciov!”

At this, the audience exploded into cheers, the din rattling the entire stadium:

“TANYAAAAA!”

“HELL YEAAAAHHH!!!”

“YOU DID IT!”

“WHAT UP, DRAGONSLAYER!”

“Dude, she didn’t *slay* it! More like... DRAGON TAMER!”

“You still alive down there, Fallen Angel?!”

After all the middle school poetry and general incompetence, Ryan had essentially committed social suicide, so it was safe to say that Tanya had won the leader match by a landslide. And with her victory confirmed, Lilium were declared the champions of the Sparring Tournament.

For the first time in the history of their proud nation, an all-woman party had won first place in the Sparring Tournament—and on their very first try.

Together, they had made history.

6

“Lord Maxwell!”

He turned at the sound of his name. “Oh, it’s you.” He had been watching the events of the tournament unfold from the VIP box, and he was entirely unamused.

“Yes, milord. It is I, Goliath.”

Evidently his protégé informant was here to see him. He snorted. “I’m not in the mood for a chat. What do you want?”

“I’m here to make a report. It’s about the Wicked Dragonwhore.”

“...Laplace?”

He hadn’t spoken the name in an eternity, and it soured on his tongue. The woman he’d seen down in the arena, and her magic circle—there was no mistaking it.

Meanwhile...

“Tanya!”

“Laplace!”

Back at the bench, the three women were engaged in a ferocious group hug.

Tanya couldn't stop smiling. Her revenge was now complete.

"Hahaha! I still can't believe he summoned a Red Dragon! And those poems were something else!"

"I know, right?! Hee hee hee! Scarlet-Black! Fallen Angel! And the little crosses!"

"Oh my god, Nadine, stop! I can't breathe!"

They were all giggling uncontrollably.

"Hey, Laplace?" asked Tanya.

"Mmm?"

"You gave him a force field, didn't you?"

Laplace grinned mischievously.

Tanya was, of course, referring to the moment she cast Explosion on Ryan. She'd sensed that there was a force field protecting him, but knew there was no way he could've cast it himself. And not just because he was a failure of an adventurer, either. Tanya only knew of one person who could create a force field without the aid of a magic circle or incantation.

"Oho, cat's out of the bag. I should've known you'd catch on."

"Duh! I mean, otherwise the whole arena would be covered in his viscera by now!"

"Hahaha! Now there's a mental image I didn't need! You're hilarious, you know that?"

"Glad you think so."

"I'm also pretty sure you weren't *actually* planning on killing him."

"Eek..."

"You're too much of a softie for that."

"Oh yeah, total softie... except for the part where she *dug up his cringey old poetry and made him read it in front of a live audience*," Nadine snarked under her breath.

“Besides, what sort of Great Sorceress would I be if I didn’t at least enable you to beat him black and blue to your heart’s content?” Laplace continued.

“Hee hee... How very thoughtful of you.”

Laplace must have known how Tanya would react to the presence of a force field—more specifically, that she’d crank up the dial on her mana output in order to hit him with the biggest blast she could manage. *And it felt fucking amazing.*

“Thanks, Laplace.”

“Heh heh... All in a day’s work for this Great Sorceress!” Throwing up a peace sign, she kissed Tanya on the cheek.

Then a voice came over the loudspeaker:

“We will now begin the awards ceremony. Champions, please report to the arena!”

“Laplace! Nadine! That’s us!” Tanya held out a hand to each of them, and once they had taken hold, she declared: “Let’s get out there!”

“*Oui, oui!*”

“Right you are!”

And so Lilium walked out to tumultuous applause.

7

“Hello, everyone. We’re your winners for this year’s tournament. Thank you so much for your support! Things got pretty hairy for a minute there, but more than anything, I’m glad to know that no one in the audience was injured. Anyway, uh... I just wanted to say that... this victory belongs to more than just Lilium.

“Take a look around you. Notice just how many adventurers there are in this town. And then ask yourself: why is it that the gender ratio for the average party is so heavily skewed? The smallest parties usually only have one female member, and even the larger ones with 20-plus members still only have about

three women on the roster, max. On top of that, it's almost unheard of for a woman to lead a party herself.

"We work hard to be a part of this society, all while that same society tells us to 'shut up, show some skin, and don't complain.' But if you think about it... how many female adventurers stay in the field into their 30s? Into their 50s? Hardly any of them, right?

"Anyway, uhh, so my point is, um... the way things are right now kinda sucks! And I think we should change it! We need to stop holding ourselves back because we're female, or because we're a certain age, or because our skin is a certain color. Your big adventure is still out there! Don't let *anything* or *anyone* keep you down!

"We can be anything we want—Healers, or Mages, or even Knights. And it's up to us to forge that path for the next generation of little girls who will follow in our footsteps. So I ask you to hold your head high and proudly continue your journey well into your 30s! Or your 50s! And to all the little girls out there who dream of adventure—this victory is for you."

And so, on that historic day, Tanya's speech received a standing ovation.

Epilogue: The Sorceress Broods At Dusk

1

The scarlet rays of sunset shone upon the clock tower as it stood tall over the capital. Ordinarily no human could hope to scale its height, and yet someone was standing at the very top: an ancient and beautiful Sorceress.

Humming to herself, Laplace gazed down at the city below, her long dark hair dancing in the breeze.

“To all the little girls out there who dream of adventure...”

Although Tanya’s victory speech had been the subject of mockery for a handful of men, it spread among the female adventurers like wildfire, and everyone was talking about it.

“Eh... Those assholes need to get with the times anyway,” Laplace mused to herself.

She floated up into the air. She was a bubble, and the sunset was her ocean.

“It’s all ancient history now... but maybe I should have fought it, like Tanya did...”

She increased her altitude, shooting through the clouds and up into her own little world—just her and the stars.

“Oh, Tanya...”

Back in the Western Wasteland, when Tanya first destroyed the mountain that had kept the Great Sorceress imprisoned—along with the high-level force field that surrounded it—all with a single Explosion spell, Laplace had found herself wondering, *who IS this woman?* For the first time in 300 years, she breathed fresh air and flew through the skies. And when she sought an answer to her query, what she found was *anger*. Anger at the injustices she had suffered. Tanya symbolized that resentment and grief... and she was *beautiful*.

But more than anything, Tanya's anger was emotionally moving. It felt like a sign from the heavens, telling Laplace: *it's okay to be sad about what happened. It's okay to mourn. And it's okay to get upset.*

"If only..."

She thought back to the misunderstanding. To the "crime" she had never committed. To her wrongful imprisonment. Though she was hailed as the Great Sorceress, she had never truly been free.

"If only I'd stood up for myself, like Tanya did... maybe things would've been different..."

On a whim, she halted her levitation magic. As she descended through the dusky sky, she took a deep breath. And then, in a loving, singsong voice, she whispered the name of the detestable man who had chained her down... the man who had been her entire world, once upon a time.

"Maxwell..."

2

Later, after her stroll through the sky, Laplace was float-walking through the plaza when a familiar voice called her name. Turning, she spotted a glimpse of lavender hair through the crowd.

"Laplace! I've been looking all over for you!"

"*Bonsoir*, Nadine."

"Tanya's been worried sick about you! Come on—the victory banquet's about to start!" Nadine explained, tugging urgently on her sleeve.

"*Oups!* That won't do at all! It won't be much of a banquet if yours truly isn't there to liven things up!"

And so they headed to their favorite haunt, the Little Vixen. Tonight there would be two parties: one to celebrate Liliu's victory, and another to celebrate Tanya's favorite disciple passing her entrance exams.

Right as they opened the door—

“Yay! It’s Laplaaaace!” shouted Tanya as she ran over to hug her. Her face was already flushed bright red.

“Well now! Smashed already, are we?”

“It’s not my fault, you took so long to show up!” she whined.

“Oh, THERE you are! Took you long enough!” called a voice. Laplace looked over at the counter to find Katherine pouting her lips. “I mean, Grandma’s cool with people hanging out in her restaurant, but we were starting to think you people would be here all night!”

After the Sparring Tournament, Katherine had resigned from Ryan’s party. Now she worked freelance while helping out at her grandmother’s tavern in her spare time, and she had helped arrange the celebration “in exchange for opening my eyes about a lot of stuff.”

“Hee hee! Oh, Katherine, don’t be so huffy,” Nadine laughed.

“Rrgh... Fine, but only for you,” Katherine grumbled.

It was unclear where the two women currently stood with each other, but suffice it to say, they didn’t seem to dislike each other’s company.

Just then, two of Alisa’s siblings dashed over excitedly.

“Miss Laplace!”

“Look, look! There’s so much food! Come have some, Miss Laplace!”

“Hey there, kids.” As she waved down at them, they squealed in delight.

“Sorry about the ruckus. I know my brothers and sisters are a noisy bunch,” Alisa explained apologetically. A shiny new Imperial Magic Academy badge was pinned to the front of her shirt.

“Heh heh heh! It’s *fiiiine*! Now let’s chow down, Alisa!” a rather intoxicated Tanya declared. “Oh, that reminds me! Laplace, get a load of this!”

“Mmm? What is it, Tanya?”

Tanya grinned impishly. “Alisa told me that *nearly half* of this year’s new students are girls!”

“*Oho.*” The two shared a conspiratorial smile.

Evidently those old men had stopped “adjusting” the girls’ test results. They must have taken Tanya’s... “lecture”... *very* seriously. And without those artificial point reductions, what do you know? Half of the successful applicants turned out to be female.

“It’s kind of strange, don’t you think? I mean, everyone always says girls aren’t supposed to be Mages because it’s too dangerous,” Alisa mused, her cheeks flushed, her eyes twinkling with pride.

Tanya cupped the younger girl’s cheek in her hand. “It’s not strange at all. They had a dream, so they put the effort in, and now all that hard work has paid off. There’s nothing in this world that a girl can’t do.”

“Oh, Sensei, you’re such an inspiration!” Alisa beamed at Tanya.

Tonight we celebrate the women, young and old, who work hard every day to make their dreams come true.

Tanya raised her hand. “Excuse me, but... we’d like to order one of everything on the menu!”



4

That same night, atop the tallest spire in Ode Castle, at the very center of the city... a young girl sighed quietly as she gazed out at the small fragment of the night sky visible through her window.

She had pretty features, with sparkling silver hair, rosy cheeks, and deep violet eyes.

“Oh, how lovely,” she swooned to herself as her mind replayed the events of the Adventurers’ Sparring Tournament she’d witnessed just the other day. With her chin in her hands, she sighed dreamily.

Behind her, someone cleared her throat in annoyance. “I do believe it’s past your bedtime.”

“Oh, Vis. I didn’t realize you were here.”

“Vis” was a woman dressed head to toe in modest white robes. Her skirt trailed behind her and her hair was carefully concealed under a habit—this was the traditional garb of a pious woman. Her voice was so flat, it could register as eerie depending on the listener.

“Are you thinking about the tournament again?”

“No, I’m thinking about *Lilium*, thank you very much!”

“Same difference. You ought to be ashamed, Your Highness.”

The words *Your Highness* put a frown on the young girl’s face. “Aren’t I entitled to flights of fancy in my own bedroom, at least?” she muttered before she could stop herself.

Observing the Adventurers’ Sparring Tournament was but one of Arianora’s many royal obligations. She’d always thought of it as an event where brutish men tore each other apart in the name of glory and reward money. But this year’s winning party was a bird of a different feather, because all the members were women.

Instantly Arianora was captivated. They were strong and graceful, with kind

hearts, and as she watched them succeed, why, she felt as though she were on cloud nine.

All her life she'd been raised as a proper lady, window dressing to diplomatic events, with a political marriage all too inevitable once she came of age. Born female into the imperial royal family, this was the most she could ever hope for.

She was only thirteen, a late bloomer with still-budding curves—a child in every sense. But despite her age, her position as a princess and the duties required therein were more than enough to mature her mentally.

“Oh, Vis, if only you'd seen Lady Tanya, Lady Nadine, and Lady Stone Cold Stunner in action, I'm sure you'd understand! They were so very impressive!”

“I understand why you might admire women adventurers and all their lack of feminine trappings, but you are the Crown Princess of Pajan, and you must exercise some self-restraint!”

“Grrrr... I hate you, Vis,” Arianora grumbled, biting back a yawn. She climbed into her large, luxurious, perfectly made bed. ““To all the little girls out there who dream of adventure...”” she whispered under her breath as she slowly drifted off to slumberland. She was quoting Tanya, the leader of Lilium—specifically, her victory speech at the tournament.

We can be anything we want—Healers, or Mages, or even Knights. And it's up to us to forge that path for the next generation of little girls who will follow in our footsteps.

The pink-haired Magi-Knight had received thunderous applause from the women in the audience that day. Truly the sight warmed Arianora's little heart. *Maybe someday... maybe in my next life, I could be one of those strong, graceful women, too.*

“Oh, I hope I can meet the ladies of Lilium... someday...”

And so the little girl drifted off to sleep... to dream of adventure.

Afterword

Nice to meet you! My name is Kaeruda Ameko. Thank you for reading *Sexiled: My Sexist Party Leader Kicked Me Out, So I Teamed Up With A Mythical Sorceress!* A lot of the sexism found in this story is infuriatingly rampant here in the real world, but I hope you enjoyed the book nonetheless.

I started writing this story in reaction to news of a certain medical university's rigged test scores, and somehow it ended up being my big authorial debut. While the majority of web novels focus on male power fantasies, *Sexiled* goes completely against the grain in that regard, so I'm nervous that I might get some backlash for it. Please don't be mad at me, okay? Let's fool around and have some fun, wink wink... (Kidding!)

As I was writing this story, I received an incredible outpouring of support from countless people. Although my mentor, Takayama Seiichi-sensei, was swamped with work during the anime adaptation of *The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar*, he still found time to advise me on numerous occasions. Not to mention all the encouraging messages from my readers—I'm so, so grateful. Also, a HUGE thank you to my editor, Y-san (yuri fan), who trawled the internet in search of the perfect catchphrase, which ended up being "Sticking It To Sexism!" I'm so glad I got to work with you!

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone who picked up a copy of my book: thank you so, so much! I poured my heart and soul into both the web novel and the official print version, and I hope you'll continue to support me in the future. I can only pray that the story of Tanya and Laplace will give hope to all of you out there dreaming of adventure.

Until we meet again—hopefully in volume 2—farewell!

Bonus Short Stories

The Legend of the Bespectacled Receptionist

“That receptionist... Who the hell is she...?!”

The Ode Adventurers’ Guild was home to one urban legend in particular: “They say one of the Guild workers is impossible to sneak up on.”

“Ridiculous. She’s just a receptionist! What are you so scared of, man?” one guy whispered to his party leader.

“No, I’m serious! She never lets her guard down!” the party leader lamented. “I’ve tried everything, but I can’t touch her butt...!”

“What’s that? Something’s wrong with your butt? Is it hemorrhoids?” asked a cheerful voice.

“Eeek!” The party leader spun around.

There, standing behind him, was the Guild receptionist, her lavender hair tied back into two braids, a customer service smile plastered onto her face. The light reflected off of her large, round lenses, concealing her expression. It was terrifying.

“It’s her... We’re in trouble...!”

“We’re in trouble? Did you spot a boss monster in the neighboring field or something?”

“No, no! That’s not it!”

“Hee hee... Very well then. Oh, that reminds me! Lately we’ve been getting complaints from the female adventurers that an unidentified groper has been touching them. If you have any information, please let me know, alright?” She grinned.

Her name was Nadine Amaryllis, and she was the source of the urban legend. She was also extremely competent at documenting, filing, and accounting, so

she was very well-regarded at the Guild.

“Damn it... Seriously, she never misses a thing...!”

“I sure wouldn’t want to get on her bad side...”

What they didn’t know was that this “mere receptionist” had also graduated from adventuring school (as a Healer, but she’s an Assassin, too; it’s a long story). While the other adventurers all marveled at their inability to sneak up on her, from Nadine’s point of view, their skills simply didn’t hold a candle to hers. Not only was she a master of stealth, but she could knock people out, too. If she felt like it, that is.

But more importantly: while she didn’t appreciate their mindset, that other people’s bodies were theirs for the touching, these men didn’t seem to understand that they were only getting away with it *because she was letting them*.

Incidentally, when the people who knew of Nadine found out that she had joined Liliun, the all-female party, absolutely no one was surprised. But when they found out that this master of stealth was actually a Healer, they all reacted in the same way:

“Healer, my ass!!!”

Here’s Your Water, Asshole

This story takes place about three months before Tanya Artemiciov, the exceptional Mage, was kicked out of her party due to her gender.

“Hey! Tanya! Get this man a beer!” Tanya’s party leader, Ryan, called across the tavern. Tonight they were throwing a party for all of his mercenary buddies.

“Coming right up...”

Man, fuck this, Tanya thought to herself as she carried a bottle over to some old guy she didn’t know.

“C’mon, Tanya! Give us a smile, eh?”

“That’ll cost extra.” *If you want a smile, then get your wallet out.*

Being an adventurer meant living in a male-dominated society, and as such, this task was normally dumped on the women, most of whom worked as Healers. This made no sense, considering Healers were already paid less than other classes. *I mean, doesn't this count as overtime?! Where's my overtime pay?!*

"Rrrgh... This is so stupid!" Tanya growled under her breath, a vein bulging in her forehead as she ran back and forth fetching drinks. She'd only volunteered to do this to give the Healers a break from Ryan's slave driver attitude. Ten minutes in and she was ready to quit.

God, I was such an idiot to start this party with some guy I vaguely knew from my childhood. Look at him. He's not having "business talks." He's just getting plastered! Not only that, but somebody keeps trying to grab my ass! Keep it up and I'll cut your fucking hand off! And after that, your dick is next!

"Tanya, your party leader's trying to throw a nice party for us. You shouldn't take it for granted!"

"He's right! Besides, you'll never get married with that nasty look on your face!"

Tanya gritted her teeth. "Where do you think he got the money to pay for this stupid party?"

But the buzz of the banquet rendered her low growl inaudible.

A few hours later, Ryan and his buddies were kicked out of the tavern for getting too drunk.

"Guhhh... Tanya... get us some water...!" they demanded.

But of course, Tanya was all too willing to serve. She was just that kind and considerate! Donning a perfect smile, she began to cast.

"Breath of Undine, gush forth in an icy torrent!"

This was one of Tanya's best spells—one that controlled water, the very thing these men so craved.

"I summon thee! **Tidal Wave!**"

WHOOOOSSSHHHH!

“Pffgpppb! What the hell?!”

“There’s your water!” Tanya grinned as a veritable ocean descended upon Ryan and the others. “Anyway, thanks for the party! See ya!”

And so she strode off down the street, grumbling...

“Someday I’m gonna buy all the drinks I want, damn it!”

Ode’s Most Popular Boutique

These days, Laplace was acting a bit... differently.

“Huh? Teatime? Let me think... Maybe after I finish my work—I mean, errands.”

“*Bonjour*, Tanya! Do me a favor—don’t ask questions, just try on this armor, okay? Perfect! It looks so great on you!”

Every now and then Tanya would catch her smiling to herself and muttering something like, “Time to check this month’s sales report... *Mon dieu*, I must be a genius!”

It was really cute—ahem. Scratch that.

Granted, Lilium didn’t have a rule against moonlighting, per se, but...

“Gah, I’m so curious!”

This was Tanya’s excuse for tailing Laplace as she boldly floated through the city (after the Sparring Tournament, she no longer saw any reason to hide it).

The members of Lilium didn’t spend every waking moment together; during downtime, they were free to do whatever they liked. Tanya herself often wandered off to study magic and mana. But Laplace’s comments seemed to be hinting at something, and like any other human, Tanya could only resist temptation for so long.

She arrived at the main street in the eastern district—the same place where, early into her friendship with Laplace, they’d caused a bit of a disturbance in the armor shop. *Awkward. Better make sure that guy doesn’t see me.*

Just then, she saw Laplace enter a store. The sign read: *ADVENTURERS' GUILD RETAILER*.

“What?!” *No way—is she going to get revenge on him?!* Tanya hurried into the store after her... and found Laplace and the shopkeeper engaged in a friendly chat.

“Hey there, Ms. Fashion! I’ve been waiting for you!”

“Hello again! I do appreciate you renting out your shop space to me.”

“But of course! I hate to say it, but... y’know, for a store that’s only open once a week, somehow Laplace Fashions outsells me every time!”

“Heh heh heh! I’m surprised you would even try to compete with a Great Sorceress. Nevertheless, I applaud you for your courage!”

They’re... friends?! No—business partners?!

“Wh... Laplace?!”

“Welcome to Laplace Fa... Oh.”

Following an interrogation, Tanya learned that Laplace had received an overwhelming amount of correspondence asking about where Liliun purchased their new, more modest armor. The female adventurers had all been duped into wearing bikini armor, convinced that scanty attire would somehow improve their mana flow, but now they saw that it was entirely possible to kick ass with one’s body discreetly covered.

Laplace, with her love of dressing girls up in cute outfits, immediately decided to cash in on her hobby and start a pop-up boutique.

“It’s pretty popular, too! The shopkeeper here has been helping me with sales and operations planning!”

“Heh heh! Who knew this kind of armor was in such high demand with these chicks—er, female adventurers!”

“Hee hee... I imagine it’s the allure of my spectacular designs!” Laplace thrust out her chest, cleavage on full display.

“And... what are the sales figures, exactly?” Tanya asked timidly.

“Hmm? Oh, um...” Laplace bent forward and whispered the number in Tanya’s ear.

It was more than a lower-class noble’s entire net worth.

After-Story: It’s Not “Feminine,” It’s Called Having Basic Life Skills

The Imperial Magic Academy was a few months into the new semester, and test time had finally rolled around. As an official student enrolled in the school of her dreams, Alisa was elated to be studying magic.

“A study group with your friends? That’s awesome! You should go!” said Tanya Artemiciov, grinning. Leader of an all-female party called Lilium, Tanya was a genius who had graduated from the Imperial Magic Academy at the top of her class. She had also served as Alisa’s mentor leading up to the academy entrance exams, as well as—

“Miss Tanya! Play house wif me!”

“No! She’s gonna play tag wif *me*!”

“No, no! I wanna play hide and go seek!”

—babysitter for Alisa’s many young siblings, since they were all orphans.

“How about you play house with Miss Laplace?”

“Yaaaay!”

At this, the woman in the black dress nearly choked on her tea as she floated in midair in Alisa’s cramped house. “Hey now! Don’t drag me into this, *s’il vous plaît*!”

“I was just trying to include you since you’re over there sulking in the corner.”

“I am *not* sulking! I was enjoying a lovely teatime, thank you very much!”

This woman once went by “Stone Cold Stunner,” a ridiculous joke of an alias, but in truth she was Laplace the Great Sorceress, sealed away for the past 300 years.

“Oh, good grief... Fine, if you insist! But you’re lucky I’m not charging extra!”

“Yaaaay! I wuv you, Miss Laplace!”

To the little ones, however, she was just a nice lady. Alisa heaved a sigh of relief.

“Don’t worry. We’ll babysit for you tomorrow so you can go to the study group.”

“Thank you so much, Sensei!”

Alisa jumped for joy. Normally she spent her days juggling school and childcare, entirely on her own, but with their help she could finally have the chance to study for the test without having to worry about her siblings.

Alisa was so happy, she decided to go all-out and prepare a nice lunch for herself. Then, in the morning, she made plans with her friends to eat lunch together.

The study group was a yearly tradition, held in a lecture hall on campus. Attendance was purely optional, but open to students of all ages, comprised of hard-working commoners in a school filled with the children of aristocrats and famous spellcasters. Apparently Tanya had once attended this very study group; according to the rumor mill, she was so talented that she’d essentially served as a substitute teacher.

“It’s so lovely, seeing all the female students this year,” commented a handsome and well-liked older student.

“Oh, yes,” his posse agreed.

Truth be told, there would have been more female students a lot sooner, had it not been for the test score reduction scandal that Lilium “resolved” just a few months ago. But most people didn’t know about this, and so to an outside observer it simply appeared as though Alisa’s grade level had an abnormally high female turnout. And with the aristocrats no longer able to buy their way into the school with point adjustments in exchange for “donations,” a lot of these newly enrolled students were self-supporting.

These less fortunate students had wanted to enjoy a nice lunch together, but —

“Whoa! They’re so feminine!” the handsome older student exclaimed innocently as he watched the girls pull out their boxed lunches.

“Uh... what?” Alisa asked, sandwich halfway to her mouth. Feminine? What was he talking about? They were wearing the same school uniforms as everyone else, no makeup, no fancy hair decorations, nothing.

“What do you mean...?” asked another girl, tilting her head in confusion.

“I mean, you made your own lunches and everything! Us guys could never do that!” the handsome student grinned.

Alisa blinked back in disbelief. To be fair, all of the students who had brought their own lunches were, in fact, female. Alisa herself had simply chalked this up to sheer coincidence, and yet the other guys were all nodding in agreement.

“Uhhh...”

Alisa thought long and hard. What would Tanya, the winner of the Sparring Tournament, who proudly dedicated said victory to “all the little girls out there who dream of adventure,” say in this situation?

In the end, she went with her honest opinion:

“I don’t think it has anything to do with being feminine... Isn’t it just a basic life skill?”

After-Story: Business Is Booming At The Little Vixen

A woman stood in a hospital room at the Ode Central Hospital. The pointy ears sprouting from the top of her head suggested she was a beastkin of the albino fox variety. In her hand was a sealed envelope containing a letter of resignation.

“...So there you have it! As of today, I quit!” With that, Katherine Foxxi thrust the envelope into the hands of her now-former party leader, Ryan Daars, who was wrapped head to toe in bandages. This was the man who had once fired Tanya. He stared back blankly at her.

“W-Wait—”

“Don’t bother trying to stop me! Goodbye!” And at that she spun on her heel and left the room.

As her heels clacked on the linoleum floor, Katherine took a deep breath and shuddered.

“That... was... AWESOME!!!”

So what if I’m a woman? I can still be an adventurer.

Deep down, she felt a tiny bit of gratitude towards the bespectacled Healer who had helped her see the light.

“That said, I can’t exactly be unemployed,” Katherine mused aloud as she walked down the street.

She soon arrived at her destination: The Little Vixen, a tavern operated by her grandmother. Despite its small size, it was popular for its comfort food inspired by authentic beastkin cuisine—so popular that they even attracted aristocrats from time to time. Ever since she was a kit, the restaurant had always been fairly successful.

As she opened the door, a little bell jingled overhead. “G-Grandma? You here?” Katherine called.

“Well, hello there, Kathy!” her grandmother responded. She’d grown stooped with age in recent years, but her warm smile was still the same as ever.

Katherine heaved a sigh of relief. Whenever she had a bad day, somehow she always wound up right back here.

“Um, listen, Grandma...”

And so, as her grandmother worked busily in the kitchen, Katherine told her all about the Sparring Tournament, and the bespectacled Healer, and the stupid, sexist party she’d joined, and all the other horrible things that had happened to her.

After she was finished, she heaved a satisfied sigh.

“Did you get it all off your chest?” her grandmother asked. She nodded.

“Actually, um... I was wondering if you’d hire me to work at the tavern for a while!”

“Oh my! You want to wait tables?”

“I’ll do whatever you want me to!”

“Well, that’s fine by me, as long as you’re willing to put in the effort. But we get some nasty old drunks in this tavern, you know,” her grandmother warned her, concern in her eyes.

Katherine’s ears drooped. “Do I have to... ‘be professional’ and ignore them?”

“Absolutely not! Don’t be silly, girl. Listen here: you fine them 1,000 seculs, and you kick them right out on their rears!”

“Wait... Really?”

“Darn tootin’! That’s what I do, anyway! You remember the time I was in the back room and that man started talking to you about how a ‘proper woman’ should act?”

Katherine nodded. Like it or not, his words had stayed with her for a long time.

“Good grief. I swear, it just HAD to happen when I was in the middle of cooking! But I punished him with five years of dishwashing duty!”

“Wh... Seriously?!”

The old woman grinned and winked, and soon Katherine found herself grinning, too.

“You’re such a badass, Grandma!”

Over the years, the Little Vixen would gain a reputation as the tavern with the poster girl who would blast you with Fox-Fireballs if you tried to get fresh with her... but that’s a story for another time.

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Sexiled: My Sexist Party Leader Kicked Me Out, So I Teamed Up With a Mythical Sorceress! Volume 1

by Ameko Kaeruda

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